LOREEN BRIGHT WEASEL

A NOVEL

JAMES POLK

$9.95

The town of Hebb in southeastern Montana doesn't know what hit it when Loreen Bright Weasel arrives to perform good deeds. She takes up residence as a maid for Winn and Sheep Triumph and proceeds to shake up the sleepy little town. Loreen's sights are set on sainthood.

Sheep decides to run for mayor on a one-plank platform: He will close down the brothel owned by his first wife, Marlyss. He ignores the anxieties of his constituents—the gas shortage, nuclear leaks, and international disarmament—in his determination to destroy the brothel.

Meanwhile, Loreen is finding sainthood difficult. All hell breaks loose when she performs her unwanted good deeds and "Corporate Works of Mercy"; whites and Indians alike are transformed by her unasked-for miracles. And—to make her quest nearly impossible—she discovers that she's pregnant.

Loreen is determined to perform a miracle for Sheep, who'd been deeply hurt by Marlyss. In the process, Loreen hopes to win the grace of God. The conclusion will surprise you, if you can stop laughing long enough to let it.

Loreen is resting for the time being. But your town may be next. God is holding her in readiness for another onslaught, and she could burst forth once again like a blasting bomb of glory on the sinful, pining, all-unready world.

With this rollicking but not unkind satire of religion and the West, James Polk makes a stunning debut. His unleashed humor provides a rare entertainment.

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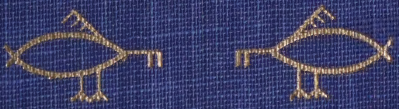
The Passion of Loreen Bright Weasel



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James Polk

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PART ONE

The Mission School

I

AFTER THEY put Pa away for his voices, Loreen was sent to live with the nuns. She got knee cramps from all the praying and scrubbing at the Mission, but it was better than that shack in the hills with the kerosene lamp smoking, and the shadows, and Pa bellowing out the words with none to understand. Your dead ma is speaking through this tongue, he told her, his Ouija board out and the teardrop-shaped pointer going round and round the alphabet, over YES, NO, and GOODBYE. But when Pa took to the bottle, Mama wandered on home to the cemetery and the animals started in. Magpies pecked out a code on lines of barbed wire. Bull snakes with secret writing down their backs slid through the kitchen, and once a rattler coiled on the stoop to buzz the deeper truths.

A social worker showed up to see why Loreen never made it to school anymore. He was a tired, slow-spoken man, but Pa didn't like his questions any the better for that and grew sulky, staring at the walls. The social worker droned on about young Loreen this, poor Loreen that, until Pa put both hands to his ears and ran out to the back yard by the wringer washing machine and the gas pump with the moon head. He turned buffalo, braying out his special words to the sun. The social worker tried to drag him back into the house and Loreen jumped in between,

just as Pa, whirling in the cheatgrass, struck out with a knife. Seeing the blood drip, Pa fell to his knees and wept in his human voice, but it was too late.

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"And did he ever touch you, my child?" asked Father Grady in the confession box at the Mission.

"He slashed me down the arm."

"I mean, indacent things," said Father Grady in his gentle brogue, for all the priests came from abroad.

"I jumped in between. It was all my fault, my most grievious fault."

"*Grievous*," said Father Grady. "Alone with that parson in the hills, and you but a young garl. Did the Lard protect?"

Stumped, Loreen cast her eye to the plaster crucifix floating like a bone in the darkness above. Give me the answer, she prayed. Behind his black screen, Father Grady whispered: "Indacent advances? Parvarsions?"

"He slashed my arm, but they sewed it up. It was an accident."

Father Grady gave her ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys for tempting others, and Loreen left the confessional sponged clean. She was afraid of the school at first, but then saw how good crawled out of evil. The Mission was holy blond brick with white linoleum inside and white lilacs without, and a smell of damp white gumbo coming up from the Tongue River, those times of year there was water in it. The walls of her dorm were covered in a plaster cake frosting, spackle with glass chips, and the nuns' faces glowed as if rubbed with Spry. In the chapel, Jesus showed off His Sacred Heart, His ribs and thighs

chalk white, His long no-nail toes like something hidden away from the sun for a long time, under rocks.

She had never seen so much white. Mother Januarius wore a starched bed sheet and a pearl chain rosary blessed by the Bishop of Great Falls. Father Grady wore black, but his face was like a newborn babe's, the teeth sickled at the tops in a pure pale gold without stain. Loreen understood that it was purity that made for white. The nuns were mostly virgins, and Father Grady came from Ireland where the men never did it. Oh, how she wanted his spotless fingertips to graze her brow, but in dreams it was always Pa's hands, dark as hide, moving the knife over YES, NO, and GOODBYE.

"Who here knows the Locomotive of the Seven Sacraments?" Father Grady asked in Religion. Loreen was shy, but if she didn't speak they would give her back to Pa and the infinite dark. Raising her hand, she stood up. She started from the roundhouse of Baptism, chugging along the spur lines and through the machine shops until she hit the terminal, Extreme Unction. She could feel the hate of the others girls zero in on her back, but Father Grady smiled.

"See garls? I will now award Miss Bright Weasel a blue star. Who can do the Seven Deadly Sins?"

Nobody else cared, but Loreen had been slaving at the Benziger Brothers all night. "PALEGAS," she said. "P is for Pride, A is for Anger, L is for Lust, E is for Envy . . ."

A spitball stung her neck and she heard Mary Twotrees whisper *shosta day,* which meant "eat shit" in Crow. She kept on anyway, for the soul alone counted in this vale of tears.

". . . G is for Gluttony, A is for Avarice, S is for Sloths.

Pride is the most deadly, being the mother, but they are all the most deadly. It's a mystery."

Over the weeks, she told the class about Transubstantiation, which was the real Body, and Consubstantiation, which was what the Lutherans did to each other over saltines and grape juice. For this, a gold star, and her row of many-colored stars was as the Virgin's crown.

One day, Father Grady spoke of the saints, and she realized where Pa had made his big mistake. It was okay to see things and hear the voices, but not animals, not the dead. Moving statues were the ticket. Rose petals from the sky. Blood from your palms and ankles at Easter, and then they didn't take you to the booby hatch. No, you got roasted over coals or whirled on a pinwheel and angels swooped down to drag you up with manna for the greater glory. After that, three miracles, and the lame walked and the blind saw, and then folks crawled on their knees to the temple where a scrap of you glowed in the dark on Holy Days of Obligation.

"I want to be one of them saints," she told Father Grady after class.

"Brown-nose," whispered Mary Twotrees, going out the door behind her. The other girls muttered. At long last the room stood empty except for the herd of blond desks, the Little Flower statue, and Father Grady with his sacred smell of dry-cleaned gabardine.

"You're but a garl," he said, showing gold and touching her shoulders.

"So was some of them others."

"A telling pint. Saint Barnadette of Lards comes to mind. We remember Saint Maria Goretti stabbed her seducer through the heart when he tried to do parvarsions."

He pinched at the flesh-colored plastic nose guards on his glasses, and she all but heaved herself against his black suit, to hug it tight for sheer love, as Christ had so loved the world.

"These were white garls, called by the Lard. A young Indian garl your age starts to think of cartship. She starts to primp. The bawdy develops."

But Loreen had checked it out in the mirror: heavy horn-rims and a chest as flat as all Dakota. She shook her head no, figuring she might as well give it to God.

"Sainthood is a hard presarve, Miss Bright Weasel. Especially when the flesh is ripe and tender, as in young garls. We think of St. Cecilia playing her organ at the bridegroom's indacent approach. With her divine harmonies, she distracted his lustful appetite so he could not lay a finger. She is now the patron saint of music."

Loreen hung her head. She couldn't even carry a tune.

"Prayer is the answer, my child. Direct your thoughts to St. Agnes, Lamb of God, a vargin pure. Rather than endure indacent parvarsion, she let the Romans snip away her bosom with hot shears. The teats, I mean."

Loreen stroked her arm, thinking if only she had known, she could have devoted the knife wound to a higher glory. But she was young yet, with time enough to get cut to the quick for Him. Father Grady urged her to think of the nun's vocation as a first step to the hard preserve. Speaking of the Call, his white hands soothed down her back in benediction, and she ran joyous into the winter air, fairly gulping at the purity.

"Cunt," whispered Mary Twotrees in the dorm that night. "Did you get a gold star for feeling his thingy?"

An idea of Father Grady's thingy scuttled into Loreen's mind, but she whisked it straight out again, knowing a

sacrilege when she saw one. Mary's bedsprings creaked. Her breath was hot and spicy with licorice Nibs as she slid in under the army blanket beside Loreen and began her sinful feel. "Any hair on it yet?" Mary asked, with a tongue worming at the ear, and Loreen locked her thighs tight shut and prayed "fruit of the womb" over and over. Then Mary went at her with fingers and teeth, and she said her Jesus-Mary-Joseph prayer so that the soul would stay white as the Catechism milk bottle and not get crusty from the flyspecks of desire. Mother Januarius passed by, a white ghost in the night. "A hen party, girls?" she sang out. "Ah well, I know what it is to be young."

Mary held fast for a minute, but had no choice. With a hard finger-kiss into Loreen's palm, she slipped back to her own bunk as Loreen tossed and turned. "Now I lay me down to sleep," she prayed to St. Agnes, virgin pure, but her body shuddered as the knife struck. Pa turned in the darkness, bull snakes tense in his hands, his buffalo mouth braying the words. Next morning there was blood on the flannelette sheets, and Mary loaned her a mini-pad.

At Good Friday exams, she named all the Corporate Works of Mercy and the Douay Beatitudes, winning a scapular medal of the inflamed Sacred Heart. Father Grady showed her how it worked, the shoestrings going over both shoulders like a harness, the plastic pouch of prayers at the back between the shoulder blades, so a person would feel the full weight of Golgotha and not get any funny ideas.

"What's this here on your tits?" Mary wanted to know when she crawled in that night. "Pack of rubbers?"

"Forgive her, for she knows not what she do," Loreen sighed, turning the other cheek.

"There's one at the back, too. Who you screwing, Bright Weasel?"

"Sweet Jesus, take from me this Near Occasion of Sin."

"*Epi ha,*" said Mary, which meant "fuck you" in Crow. But she didn't try anything for a change, snuggling up for body warmth with the dorm an Amana freezer that December. After a wrestle with Jesus, Loreen put her arms around Mary, for charity was the first of these, as Christ had so hugged the lepers to show how much better He was than they. And anyway, she would soon graduate and go to have stigmata of the hands and feet in some famous convent, far from Mary, far far away from that place where Pa snorted and screamed, pawing the concrete floor.

After Easter week, Mary got straight F's and moved into Hebb to pursue her goal of cocktail hostess. Loreen thanked God that His all-seeing rod had got rid of her Near Occasion of Sin, although she had to admit that life seemed emptier without Mary. A new girl moved into Mary's bunk, which sagged and groaned overhead since the stranger weighed 214 pounds in her sweatsocks. She had zits. She snored, too, and passed gas in her sleep, and only blinked, surprised, when Loreen tried to explain the Glorious Mysteries and the Hope that Passeth Understanding. Not once did she crawl down to test Loreen's unspotted soul, but Loreen kept patient as an earwig or a mite. In His infinite wisdom, He could pop up and test her any day now, although it was turning spring just then, and His eye was probably on the sparrow.

On the first of May, Mary Day, she knelt on cold bare knees in the garden mud behind the chapel, planting Burpee seeds unasked, as a Corporate Work of Mercy. The sky was warm Virgin blue, but pinfeathers of clouds swept the horizon like angel molt and a cold wind bil-

lowed in her floral sprig dress, gift of the rummage. She stood up to corral her skirt for decency's sake when she noticed a car, a pink Parisienne slapped over with angry Woody Woodpeckers, parked by the chicken house. "Wanna party?" said a man's voice among the clucks and squawks, and Loreen went over for a closer look. Angora dice, a naked-lady air freshener, and a plastic skull hung from the rearview mirror. The man at the steering wheel drank Olympia. He wore a necklace of teeth and a kerchief headband, and she watched her own twin faces owl back at her from his mirror sunglasses. The whole package had mortal sin written all over it.

"I can't go to no party," she said politely. "Nuns'd kill me."

He gave her a big argument, saying she had a nice body and a cute smile, and Loreen couldn't help but notice that his bare chest was lean as Christ's, though browner. Nevertheless she was about to leave when she spotted the hunting knife on the dashboard. It was a real one, no toy, with the steel handle wrapped in cord and the blade thin as a razor from use. Loreen rubbed her scar, looking around for a sign. Absolute silence. In the far bottoms, prairie lilies fluttered white against cracked gumbo and the river ran gold and blue, wrinkling under gusts of spring wind. Farther still, the buttes shone pink as Strawberry Ripple and the sun pulsed overhead as if it were Fatima revving up for a miracle. Without another word, Loreen got in the car.

The driver gave a war whoop as the Parisienne bounced down to the old Tongue River road, and Loreen said a fast Act of Contrition, which was Absolution by Desire. Afterward, Father Grady would hold up her body, fresh as the day it was slain, and her breath would puff out

rose petals. Then he would kiss the sacred head now wounded and Mother Januarius would rouse the nuns for a chorus of "Daily, Daily, Sing to Mary." Loreen whistled a few bars, but the man turned on his radio loud and Tammy Wynette yelled to stand by your man. He steered the car off the road and through some cottonwood scrub. Then the lights went out. So did the engine, although Tammy Wynette kept at it. As Loreen's eyes got accustomed to the dark, she saw they were in some kind of garage, with parts of car bodies and coiled fan belts pinned to the walls. Through chinks in the roof some rays of sun beamed down like Sanctifying Grace.

"Nice, ain't it?" asked the man.

Loreen looked out her window and saw that the floor was packed dirt darkened with oil stain. Soon her head would lie down there singing "Daily, Daily, Sing to Mary," as they brought guided tours and took up the collection for Africa. She heard a clink and turned to see the man undo his pants buckle, square silver with longhorns on it. Then he unzipped his jeans, which had crimp pleats and copper studs, and wriggled them on down to show boxer shorts with black valentines. Stretching wide his thighs under the steering wheel, he said, "Ever see this?"

She had, sort of, but not so directly. The ray from heaven picked it out. He jiggled around and scratched beneath and slowly something ascended from the nest of hair: a heart. By then, his other hand had found its way under her rummage floral sprig, but after so much training with Mary Twotrees, Loreen was smart enough to lock up tight.

"Tease," he said.

"Is that your knife?" she asked, tired of beating around the bush. "The one on the dash?"

"Nope. Ain't my dash. Ain't even my car."

He started kissing, but she turned her head. Talk about bearing your false witnesses! She kept her eye on the knife, just in reach behind a St. Christopher statue on the dash, as the man fiddled with her buttons. Maybe God meant her to grab the knife and stab her seducer to the heart, like St. Maria Goretti who valued chastity so much she'd rather kill. But that had happened in Europe or New York City, where stabbing and killing were bywords, and besides, a saint couldn't go out and do the same old thing all the time and expect to catch the busy eye of the Vatican.

"Guess you better drive me home," she said sadly into the man's ear, which smelled of cloves. "No point sticking around for nothing."

"Hey come on, don't you love me?"

Love. The man's hands traveled farther down, and Loreen's thighs relaxed just a shade. There was faith and there was hope and there was charity, which was the first of these. Hadn't Father Grady said that charity was the same thing as love? And what of the Beatitudes? Her Douay spelled out in black and red that a person should love the sick, and this man grunted like he had the croup. I would see a sign, she prayed silently, and then, in a rush, it came: a grace spreading up over all, a Pentecost within. For sure, love was the first of these, and so she climbed without fuss into the back of the car, where the seat, though a hair shirt of zebra seatcovers, allowed more elbow room to get right down into the Corporate Works of Mercy.

Sneaking away after dark, she continued her Works for over a month, until it was the Feast of the Ascension when He arose with His entire body, a Holy Day of Obligation when a person couldn't get away with not taking the Host.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," Loreen said in the black closet. "My last confession was six weeks ago. Since then I have missed morning prayers two times. I have said the name of the Lord thy God in vain." In fact, she had called out one of the very worst mortal cusswords in the backseat with Brown, which was his name, but she figured Father Grady didn't need every teensy detail. Father Grady didn't seem all that interested anyway, whispering prayers to himself behind the linen screen. Then Loreen finished with, "I am sorry for these and all the other sins of my past life, especially those against the Sixth Commandment."

It was a mistake. Father Grady always took an eagle interest in sins against the Sixth — which includes Impure Thoughts and Deeds — and his prayers stopped short. "My garl," he said, "I hope you know that Impure Thoughts are as sharp iron nails hammered into the sweating brow of our Sacred Lard."

Horrified, Loreen tried to make clear that it wasn't so much the Impure Thoughts as the Impure Deeds.

"Deeds, is it? Alone or with others?"

"Well, there wasn't so many others."

"You did it alone, my child?"

"How can a person do it alone?"

"Jasus, garl, answer the question," Father Grady cried, and she could hear missals drop to the hardwood pews outside as folks listened in. "Was it that parvart, Mary Twotrees?"

"Oh no, sir, I locked it up when she come at me."

"Mother of God. Don't you know that each Impure Deed is another spear driven into His parple side? Was it one of the nuns?"

"It was more like a man."

"For shame, Loreen Bright Weasel, and you but a young tender garl!"

"You ain't supposed to know my name," she cried, shocked by the violation, but then he made her tell him all about Brown and the Parisienne on pain of the living fire, and for penance she got nine solid rosaries and a private visit from Mother Januarius with a chart of the reproductive system. It turned out the womb was meant only for Matrimony, one of the spur line Sacraments on the heavenly railroad, just before Holy Orders and the Terminal. Each of her eggs contained a human soul, scrunched up and waiting, and to trot them out before Matrimony was next door to murder. That night she stole away to the garage to tell Brown what she had learned, but the Parisienne didn't show, and later one of the girls said he'd been sent to the State School in Miles City for car theft and seducing a minor. Loreen felt just terrible to think Brown had been messing with some underaged girl and she longed to talk to him of Matrimony and the womb. Then it struck her that he might be a Protestant. Despite a relationship so deeply spiritual, they hadn't discussed religion much.

On graduation day, she felt dizzy and faint, spending hours in front of the toilet ready to upchuck. No matter how many times she stuck her finger down, nothing happened, and the Bufferins only made it worse. At last she had to attend the ceremony, for she was the valedictorian, with the most stars of any, and the clear winner of *The Imitation of Christ* bound in white Naugahyde. It was an oven in the gym. The nuns sang "Faith of our Fathers, Living Still," in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword, and Loreen's name was called. Tottering on her new spike heels, a gift from the Sodality, she walked stiffly across

the basketball court as her stomach swam on ahead. At the lilac-decked altar under the basketball hoop she unfolded the speech Mother Januarius had typed about the agonies of the Catholic female in a godless tomorrow. Then she saw Pa. He was under the visitors' scoreboard in his dress Wranglers and his slope leather hat with the rattlesnake band, and he was beginning to bray.

"Hurry it up, garl," nudged Father Grady, but her new shoes seemed to send out roots down through the wooden floor to the shale and gravel below.

"What's wrong?" hissed Mother Januarius. "You look sick."

"No!" she called aloud to Pa, and Father Grady's hand fluttered near her shoulder, like the Dove come to rope Mary into the miracle without sex. Then it was not Pa she saw, but Brown with his hunting knife coming at her from the corner, and the girls had said he was in reform school! "Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph," she groaned as the audience stirred in their folding chairs. Leaving her heels planted on the altar, Loreen took off barefoot across the blue and red circles, wheels within wheels, painted on the basketball court, but Brown was bearing down from the other direction and Pa yipped like a coyote in the balcony. Slipping and sliding, she doubled back through the girls' locker room where no man dared go, and with a cry squeezed through the window to head for high ground.

She prayed all day among the swales and gullies, but no Virgin appeared in the sagebrush to forgive her or to warn against the Russian bear. It was all her fault, her most grievious fault! But the Virgin was busy in Europe with never a thought for southeastern Montana and so, at sunset, she dragged back, repentant, to Father

Grady's mobile home, her sissy blouse covered in burrs like great June bugs, her navy skirt a smear. Limp white hands motioned her into the dark, where there were tatted doilies on the sofa and a green smell of Palmolive from the sink. A light glowed behind a picture of Jesus and a slung lamb, walking the Garden alone with John F. Kennedy. Father Grady paced in corduroy mules before her, his legs pale below baggy tan shorts. How beautiful are the knees, she thought, rubbing her own sore ones which were peppered with gravel from meditation.

"Jasus, child, what got into you this carsed day?" he asked after a while.

"I saw Pa."

"Your father? Ah, I might have known, and him in the loony bin these many years. They say it runs in the blood."

Thinking of blood, even in this, her hour of need, Loreen couldn't help wondering about the minipads. Mary had said every month. She wanted to speak of this, but Father Grady seemed occupied with the weight of the world.

"Unfartunately, you're our prize student, Miss Bright Weasel. Never saw a garl who took so quick to the Benziger Brothers."

"Thank you, Father."

"Yet constant study, they say, is the devil's wark. The Lard prefers the innocent mind."

"Yes, Father."

"I used to think that yours was the most innocent mind ever seen at the Mission, garl. Mother Januarius even predicted you might feel the Call, although now, Jasus knows, it's hard to say what call you feel. Anyway, we've all decided you might be a great deal happier away."

Loreen choked back a sob, but he didn't mean her to

go back to Pa at all. Carefully plucking the burrs from the front of her sissy blouse, Father Grady spoke of one of the best families in southeastern Montana, the Triumphs of nearby Hebb, and of their desire for a live-in maid to help with the simple day-to-day chores. There, away from the Mission School and its ugly memories, she could find peace. Far away. Brushing the dust from her skirt, front and back, he reminded her that hard work was the Lord's best prescription. She could seek His precious medicine somewhere else, for He was everywhere. Of course, she might return to the Mission, far in the future. The Lord's house was always open, later on.

Taking both her hands, he offered up a heart-felt prayer: "Oh marciful Jasus, protect this strange garl from getting Satan stuck within her once again. And show Your great bounty, Lard, by keeping her innocent mind safe in Hebb and seeing that she don't go bersark and lay waste the country round."

"Amen," said Loreen.

Father Grady clasped her to his bosom, hands in silent benediction below. Feeling much better, Loreen rushed out into the fragrant, cheeping night, her soul shriven clean as with Brillo. In the dorm, she thought she could never sleep after such bliss, but she fell to the bed like a flour sack, and, as the snores and farts rumbled from above, she dreamed of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph shining in a mist on the basketball court while the visitors' scoreboard rang like communion bells. YES, it chimed. NO. GOODBYE.

PART TWO

The Triumph Place

I

Oh God, I've done it again, Winn Triumph thought when she spotted her new live-in maid through the picture window. She had imagined something trimmer, with buckskin fringe and a blue braid down the back. This one, getting out of the nun's car in the gravel drive, looked more like a big teddy bear with glasses, although she did have a friendly smile and, now that she was standing up straight, a pleasingly rounded bust. Probably couldn't even mix a martini, but what else could you expect in a one-horse burg like Hebb? Now keep your cool, Winn ordered herself, and hurried into the kitchen to pour a stiff one. Doc Frye had warned her, no booze with the Valium, but oh God.

Through the dead cactus at the kitchen window she watched two tall, ostrichlike nuns wander out to the miniature golf course, turning their veiled heads in ladylike oohs and ahs. They wore white winding sheets, not at all like the penguin black she remembered on real nuns Back East, but you never got the genuine article in southeastern Montana. A tank of a nun with a Mussolini face was making toward the patio, intent on the oatmeal chaise longue and the Haitian ensemble imported from Gump's. Winn drank deep. There were times when she wished she lived in an ordinary house, not a specialty attraction

like a Stuckey's or a Santa's Workshop by the side of the highway. But Sheep had wanted a showplace, and if there was one thing Winn knew it was décor.

Single-handedly, Winn had started the vogue for building on the old Tongue River flats near the gravel pits, now a prestige address. With a Czechoslovakian architect from Billings she had introduced the trilevel ranch house, not that anybody in Hebb could tell the difference between architecture and prefab. Bypassing the local merchants with their Monkey Ward modern, she had furnished in real Contemporary Modern from Dayton's, Nieman-Marcus, Hart-Albin's, and I. Magnin's. Laughed at and scorned, she had pioneered the accessory fowl pond with swans, the ornamental wishing well, and the branding iron arch made of horseshoes for the Western Touch. But oh God, try to bring California gracious living to Montana. It was pearls before swine, she thought, spilling her vial of emergency pills to the Formica and selecting a likely downer.

Not that it would be full-strength. Nothing came full-strength in southeastern Montana, and she had long suspected that Doc Frye cut her Valium with sugar on some macho cowboy theory that pain ennobled. With a glance out the window, she noticed that the Indian girl was patting Dustmop, one of the ten marmalade cats Winn had bred to match her hair. At least she seemed to like animals, Winn reflected. That would be kind of a plus. With a rush of dread, Winn remembered the first time she had tried to help the natives, the embarrassment of her life.

Twenty years before, fresh from Back East, she had camped out at the Last Stand Hotel for a year, brought to Montana by *The Virginian,* her favorite reading. In the novel, the West had been starlit nights and courtly

cowboys, whereas Winn was finding mainly lewd passes from married men with B.O. Back then, a band of Indians still camped out on the old golf course, refusing a government order to live on their reservation. Bored with selling dresses at Wilma's Modes, Winn had brought them coffee and doughnuts on her days off and had been repelled by the lack of décor in their huts. All by herself, she had gone on a charity rummage campaign throughout Hebb, storing up the junk furniture and castoffs on the Last Stand's porch, as the townspeople sniggered. Then she invited the Indians for an inspection.

"Used," Chief Gray Robe had said. "All used."

"But it's second-hand," Winn had laughed, faintly frightened. "All rummage is used, Chief Gray Robe."

"We wanted new."

"But you're Indians!" she had said in the nicest way, but the chief and his wives had simply turned their backs and gone away, as the spectators slapped their thighs with the fun of it. The rummage stayed put over the winter, gathering snow. Finally the Last Stand management ordered her to clear the junk away or pay a fine, and Winn had been forced to lug the stuff through a blizzard, returning the baby buggies, sprung mattresses, and figurines with apologies. People were pleasant enough to her face. They had even invited her in for Western Hospitality, pretending to be just folks while hating her for a dude.

This is different, Winn told herself. She needed a maid to help out, not to mention some human company while her husband was wheeling and dealing in town. So, with a last snort of bourbon, she caked on a hostess smile and moved out into the glare of the patio. The Mussolini nun sat at the pine picnic suite reading a copy of *Gourmet*

magazine. "Yoo hoo," screamed Winn. "Oh don't get up, Sister. We don't stand on ceremony around here."

"You must be Mrs. Triumph," said the nun, rising heavily. "I'm Mother Januarius. My friends call me Mother Jan."

"Oh yes?" Winn said, wondering what to call her. "It was so nice of you to drop the girl by, Mother."

"Such an original place."

"We like it."

"So much room. A wonderful place to raise children."

God, she really knows how to go for the jugular, Winn thought, but she said: "The cotton on that ensemble was imported from Haiti."

"I guess you rich folks can spread the wealth," said the bride of Christ in a baritone missionary voice that held Winn responsible for all the hunger and misery of the Third World. Nervously, Winn called attention to the Filipino hammock, the overhead wooden fan from Puerto Rico, the Taiwan wickerwork. God, who supported the Third World if not Winn Triumph?

"Real unusual," smiled Mother Mussolini, stroking her mustache. "Of course, it's all a matter of taste."

"And that's our bar. We made it from a big native boulder mounted on plumbing pipes. I got the idea from a magazine, where I get so many good ideas." Winn chatted on easily, the Valium settling in at last, and the edges of the harsh world dissolved in a golden haze. Even the nun's great slab of a face seemed more kindly. "I know our new Indian maid will love it here."

"I just hope all these nice things will be a calming influence. Our Loreen is a bit high-strung."

The edges of the world returned sharp and clear. Oh God, thought Winn. High-strung was the last thing she

needed, and, in fact, out by the black car, the girl was staring at the sky in a strange, fixed way. Winn wondered if there might be provision for an exchange. She had asked for the smartest girl at the Mission, but being valedictorian was no guarantee these days.

"Her dad's in the asylum at Warm Springs," Mother Mussolini continued cheerfully. Then she bellowed, "Loreen, get away from that filthy cat and come meet your boss."

As if shot, the girl leaped into the air and fell back against the trunk of the car. Oh God, thought Winn. Then, commanding herself to get it together, she walked over burning flagstones and gravel to get acquainted with her new employee.

"Hello, sweetheart. My name is Winn. You must be, uh, Doreen."

"Yessum."

"I know we'll be good friends."

"Yessum."

"I see you've already met Dustmop." Winn beamed down at the cat, who was panting again. The vet had said hairballs, but surely it was distemper. "We have lots of pets out here. Swans and geese. A German shepherd we call Heinz 57. After the varieties. Isn't that a cute name?"

"Yessum."

Oh God, thought Winn, why can't I ever get through to young people? Feeling shaky and out of control, she knelt down to the girl's own level. "I fixed you the cutest little room in our basement, decorated in red and brown, with a bright red plaid for the fabric. I know how you Indians must like bright colors."

"Yessum."

"But you have to help me out with the work here. I'm not a very strong woman and I have to give many parties. Not that anybody cares."

"Nome."

She was really rather sweet, Winn decided. Behind her glasses, the huge brown eyes were quite lovely, if intent. The print dress would have to go, of course, and those terrible anklets. Perhaps a shampoo for oily hair, with conditioner, could do wonders.

"My husband will be so pleased. He always worries that I take on too much. His name is Francis, but you must call him Sheep. His family raised them, you know."

"Yessum."

It struck Winn that she was holding out her hand to the girl as if tempting a large chipmunk with raisins. Rising unsteadily, she heard high-pitched squawks and shrieks from the fowl pond. Oh God, she had forgotten the other nuns, who had surely found their way to the swans and would think them tame. Once they had been very docile birds, too, but there was something about the Montana dryness that made the feathers drop off and scabs grow at the nostrils. She rushed back to the patio and Mother Mussolini, just as the thin, ostrichlike nuns came around the storehouse in a flurry of white, one of them limping.

"He bit my ankle," screamed the victim. "And I was only trying to feed him a Life Saver."

"Oh my dear, they won't eat candy," Winn comforted. "They prefer grain, really. But I'm sure it's nothing serious."

"Might be rabies," said Mussolini with authority. "It's going around."

"Not with birds," Winn reassured, wondering if rabies was not, in fact, exactly the trouble with Venus and Adonis. They certainly drooled a lot. And the local vet hadn't a clue, though respected throughout Shale County for his knack with hoof-and-mouth.

Mother Mussolini stretched the bite victim out on the oatmeal chaise as the third nun clucked and screamed and got in the way. Swans and ostriches, Winn thought. Swans and nuns. Perhaps there was some primal hatred between the species. The Valium was now sinking her head into its dull, leaden phase, and the cries and laments came to her as if stones were grinding against one another underwater. I can't go on, Winn decided, but she heard herself say, "Maybe a cool, refreshing drink? A Coke or something?"

To her dismay, they all accepted at once. Back in the kitchen, Winn made a beeline for the Jim Beam. Fathers in the insane asylum and high-strung women, oh God, the irony of it all! But perhaps their shared emotional traumas would provide the bond between herself and Darlene, once they got rid of the wounded nuns. "What's black and crawls?" she asked the bourbon bottle, and then she tittered. Now stop that, Winn. Soldiering onward, she went to the refrigerator where the Cokes were stacked like bombs behind the prime ribs. At least Maureen would be able to help with the barbecue that night. It was an important one, Sheep said, something to do with political ambition, with all the rattlesnake aristocracy getting plastered among her expensive furniture. Well, wasn't she an asset? Not that Sheep cared about assets with all his cheap women in town. If she had been a cheap woman, whoring for money or even for free,

would anybody love her? "Now stop that," she said out loud to the cave of the refrigerator. "Get the nuns their Cokes."

Instead, she opened one for herself and drank, but it didn't take. They had been leaching the mickey out of it for years, which was why they could get away with the clear glass bottles instead of the old thick green ones that kept the jism in. Shape up, she commanded, but just stood there with the fridge door open, draining electricity. The stacks of ribs, pink as newborn babes, steamed as if on the rotisserie already. Perhaps she could have a true mother-daughter relationship with the new girl, to stave off the emptiness of life. Children would have made a difference, but Sheep hadn't touched her in a decade, and then there was his "problem" and her nerves. Or was it some terrible truth about her uterus which Doc Frye didn't dare mention, being of the old school?

The nuns are waiting, she told herself, and it was really a crime how little fashion sense the Sisters had, saddling a young girl in that black crepe floral sprig and pink barrettes. It would be fun to dress her up, Winn thought warmly, and then, as she stood in the refrigerated cold, she felt her nape prickle. Someone was watching. In the doorway hung a face like the flat stony faces on the Mexican calendars she had seen on that horrible package tour to Mexico with the Hardestys.

"They said I should make myself useful," came a low murmur. Winn shook her head sharply to bring her eyes into focus. It was really very nice of the girl to offer help, and she did have extraordinary cheekbones if you looked from the right angle. Perhaps harlequin glasses or a cat's-eye frame with rhinestones would jazz things up. Contact lenses, even.

"The Cokes are in the fridge, dear."

The girl goggled, but then she slowly made her way around the island stove. Perhaps, thought Winn, a training bra might help.

"I'm so glad you're here," Winn said, touching the girl's brown arm. Tears stung at her eyes, and she told herself, now stop that. "I may seem to have everything, but sometimes I get lonely out here. You know, I've never had a daughter of my own."

Then there was a volcanic roar and the girl sprang forward with a cry. Her rump had somehow triggered the dishwasher handle from OFF to PRELIMINARY RINSE, and the empty machine reverberated like an earthquake. The new maid crouched in terror by the back bar as Winn thought, oh God, and uncapped her vial of pills. She had hired a total savage, with a father in the nuthouse to boot, and she could not go on another minute in southeastern Montana. You could try and try for California living, but what could a person from Back East do against the odds? Oh why had she ever left Minneapolis, where there was art and music and theater, where society had standards, where people lived some kind of a life?

2

How does 'Mayor Triumph' sound to you?" Sheep asked the girl at his side in the brass bed. "I guess to a hooker the name Triumph means just one thing."

The girl shrugged as she got out of bed to put on her panties. She had said nothing all afternoon, but underneath had been fierce, efficient, and quick. Sheep squirmed in order to feel his back. If there were fingernail marks, Winn would notice them. She always did.

"Triumph is a real historical tradition in these parts," he went on. "It wasn't always the name of a whorehouse."

She shinnied into tight jeans and raised her arms to put on the T-shirt. Big ones for an Indian, he thought. Ordinarily, he wouldn't touch a squaw on account of the corncob clap, but here was a real movie star with jugs enough to pose for a centerfold.

"The madame at the whorehouse, Madame Marlyss, is only a Triumph by marriage," he said. "She don't share in the general tradition."

The girl chewed a licorice Nib to show she could care less, and Sheep figured there was no point asking for historical consciousness from a redskin. Not many people had historical consciousness anymore, but those who did knew how the Triumph name shot through the past of Shale County, ever since the day in 1888 when Paddy Triumph had settled near Desolation to raise sheep, seventeen children, and a sod homestead built with his raw fingernails. Paddy Triumph had given a new face to sheepherding in southeastern Montana, and after his tragic death — he froze solid to a dipping vat during the Great Epidemic — there were many sons to carry on in his footsteps. In point of fact, some of Sheep's cousins, harelipped and pale, still ran a few flocks out near Femur Crossing, although most of the literate Triumphs had gone urban in the Depression, moving up. There had even been a Triumph Block in downtown Hebb, where Sheep's grandfather had opened his combination general store and

saloon, and after the catastrophic fire, Sheep's father had carried on the tradition by selling wild mustangs for dog food until the horses' complete extinction. The last in a line, Sheep had yet to make his mark, although most folks agreed he had a lot to live up to.

"Being mayor would mean prestige," he brooded. "Some respect for a change. And I don't mind telling you that, about now, I could sure use the cash flow."

At his last word, the girl came back to the bed, hand outstretched, her T-shirt carried high with an appliqué of Mount Rushmore across the front, Washington and Lincoln bulging straight out, Jefferson and Roosevelt scrunched down in between. Below was the message: I HAVE SEEN THE BLACK HILLS.

"Don't look so eager, bright eyes," he said. "All my cash flow's tied up in the energy crisis."

She turned away to put on high heels, and he thought of his thousands of acres of erosion in the fossil beds south of the whorehouse. He had kept his ear to the ground. Everybody predicted coal would be the coming thing again and any fool could plainly see the rich black veins etched in among the dinosaur bones on his property. Just his luck that the nation wouldn't take the plunge into dirty fuels, despite the radioactive wastes and the Arabs. Bleeding hearts worried about the ecology of strip-mining in Montana while he cried all the way to the bank, waiting for a meaningful energy policy from the President. His coal was too expensive to mine, one expert said. Poor quality, said another. Meanwhile, he was land-poor, a slave to property tax, as his better half spent the bucks as if they were going out of style, which they were, from what he'd heard about the yen. As mayor, at least, he'd receive a salary, though mayor of Hebb, Montana, wasn't

exactly on a par with chairmanship of General Motors, or even Chrysler.

The job was going begging, too. The month before, incumbent Farley T. Luce had been surprised in the newly renovated Sacajawea Motor Inn with a woman not his wife. Mayor Luce had been surprised many a time before, but the woman's husband, a member of Montana Rod and Gun, had followed the couple and shot up their love nest by the light of "The Waltons." Skilled surgeons at All Souls' Hospital had soon picked out the buckshot from Mayor Luce's behind, but the psychological scars remained. Pressured by scandal and loathing, the mayor had vanished altogether, leaving a big gap at the top of the pecking order.

"If I was mayor right now, I could pay you what you're worth," he said to the Indian. Immediately, Jefferson and Roosevelt and the other fathers of his country were overhead, grimly watching. With a sigh, he unsnapped the money belt, which slid round under the armpit for ease in fucking, and contemplated a ten instead of his usual twenty. Times were tough, and no sense giving a redskin big ideas. It was probably a big enough treat for the poor thing to climb into the sack with a white man in the first place. He wondered, not for the first time, how much his first wife charged for her favors at the whorehouse. Probably cost a bundle, for they said Madame Marlyss had brought in all kinds of sexy frills to the Triumph Place, bitch cunt Finn that she was. His fingers passed over the ten and finally fished out a dog-eared five. It was enough for a sidewalk hooker, and what had women ever done for him, anyway? He handed it over, and the girl displayed her white teeth, flecked with coal-black licorice.

"*Shosta day*," she said in a low husky way, and Sheep

figured it was some Crow compliment for terrific sex.

"I come in town every Thursday for a recharge of the old batteries," he told her with a grin. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"*Epi ha*," she said pleasantly. It struck him that she might not speak any English at all. "You're welcome," he called after her, but she had shut the door without a word.

For a few minutes, he lay on the crumpled chenille, seeing himself through the eyes of a grateful partner. Even at fifty, his stomach could pass for sheer muscle. He was barrel-chested, like all the Triumph men: it was a tradition. Smiling Irish eyes, though circled beneath, and a statesman's salt-and-pepper hair, what there was left. The butt a mite slack from middle-aged crisis and Winn's awful gourmet meals. Might do some sit-ups before he threw his hat in the ring. A person's image was all the voters cared about nowadays, what with the country's mind glued up by actors on TV. At best, he couldn't let sex appeal do it all, though. He'd have to run on the issues, like any local politician.

There were issues aplenty in Hebb: inflation, unemployment, mosquito control, water rights, the way the dollar kept bottoming out. Keeping chickens in town. The way parts of the high school kept collapsing and crushing the students. And then, best of all, the terrible whorehouse murder. Madame Marlyss would shit her britches proper if she heard her ex-husband was coming out against that. And serve her right.

The tragedy had occurred the very week of Mayor Farley Luce's downfall, a time of disturbance some blamed on the stars. Velva Rose Compass had left the Triumph Place as an Overnight Takeout, never to return. Madame

Marlyss had called police after a few days of no Velva, and Velva's client, Lyle Birdie of the Lewis and Clark Body Shop, had been grilled within an inch of his life. However, he found witnesses to prove that he had spent the night fitting twin pipes to a Volaré, and asked over and over, "What do you think I am, some kind of animal?" Nobody knew how to answer him. With Police Chief Hanafy at the Square Dance Jamboree in Rapid City, South Dakota (where he and Eunice took a second in Varsouvienne), Sheriff Buddy Potts was left in charge, a laissez-faire man on the whole. The Compass disappearance might have blown over, but then an agate hound in the old Titanothere Quarry of the fossil beds came across Velva's Lurex bolero, specialty panties, and a purse containing unidentified objects in living Dynel. This bothered a lot of people.

Word got out that a mad-dog killer was on the loose and panic swept through the metropolitan area. Women walked in pairs to the second show. Violating Western Hospitality, folks took to locking their doors at night, and drinking, wherever possible, increased. A two-headed calf was born to the Alvin B. Teeters' out at the Lazy Bar Y near Swetler. "Only a Mother" wrote an open letter to the *Hebb World*, asking pointblank how long it would be before her own sons and daughters got ravaged on Main Street, as was happening everywhere else across America.

Alarmed, the service groups — Moose, Elks, Rotary, Lions, and Drove of Does — sent a party to the fossil beds to dig for remains. They found curious things, square-headed nails and old china mostly, but no clue to the missing victim. The Boy Scouts unearthed a cheek tooth of great scientific interest, dating from that prehistoric

age when all southeastern Montana was sunk down and lapped by the warmth of a shallow inland sea. The tooth was sent to the Badlands Museum on a cushion and word leaked out that it constituted the last remains of the Compass girl. Museum attendance shot up double as country folks gathered from miles around to show their kids what was left of poor Velva and to lecture on the wages of sin.

Yes, the whorehouse murder was the dynamite issue, all right. Flushed with energy, Sheep got out of bed and spattered his body with Brut, since Winn had a nose like a retriever when it came to women. He put on boxers, a pearl-snap shirt, the beige twill suit, and his half-boots. After knotting his string tie, he slid on the agate clip that said Triumph in fourteen-karat lariat. A fat-sounding name, an honored name. A traditional name that would always mean sin and vice as long as Madame Marlyss was in town, but that might not be for long. Shrewdly, Sheep calculated his chances. Nobody in town had ever dared attack the Triumph Place. The only thing that kept Hebb going now, what with the interstate bypass and wool on the downturn, was the snatch for sale at his ex-wife's house on the edge of town. The Montana Highway Patrol didn't hold annual conventions in Hebb for the guided tours of the fish hatchery. It wasn't ranchers' wives keeping Wilma's Modes in business, and no real working cowboy bought the whips and specialty boots on sale at the Saddle Shoppe. Madame Marlyss was the drawing card for Easterners who came to shoot antelope and pheasant, for the herdsmen who flooded into Hebb with the spring thaw after too many months below zero gazing at the hind ends of beasts.

He would have to tread carefully here, and some folks might think he had a personal stake in the matter, al-

though it was twenty-odd years since the bitch had deserted him, ruining the sanctity of their marriage vows. Not that he bore any grudge. His second marriage had brought profound happiness and Winn was a real asset. But objectively speaking, the Triumph Place was bringing murder and loose morals into an upright small town, and he might find grass-roots support for dragging Madame Marlyss through the dust, tarred and feathered, begging for mercy. An unpleasant prospect, but a man had his duty to the community. Whistling softly, Sheep placed a quarter tip on the pillow for the maid service and ambled into the hall, where, from the long row of unpainted doors, came the familiar hotel sounds: country rock, faint screams, and body-in-gunny-sack thuds. He decided to go down to the porch for a quick straw-vote survey of public opinion.

The very building itself seemed to support his candidacy, for Great-Uncle Leo "Slippery Fingers" Triumph had built the hotel during Hebb's golden age. Through layers of blue cigar smoke, Sheep could see traces of the original carved oak and the plaster ceiling nipples where gas chandeliers had bulbed so long ago. Designed as a family hotel, with "booths for ladies," the Last Stand had followed the decline of the family step by step over the years, the wrought-iron elevator plunging to its doom with the stock market crash of 1929, the marble floors giving way to carpets after so many deaths by concussion. The usual clientele sat in the dark lobby spitting Copenhagen under the tinted photo murals of Hebb's traditions: the flood of '88; the tragedy of '99; cows starving in the whiteouts of '07, '21, '34, and '53; the drought; the rinderpest and the buffalo shoot; and over the fireplace of native stone, a giant oil-painted panorama of

General Custer leading his men to immortality. Sheep considered it shocking that no portrait of his great-uncle Leo hung on the wall, but apparently the man had never had his likeness taken, due to some stocks-and-bonds misunderstanding down in Lusk, Wyoming.

On the porch, a line of geezers sat dry-roasting on the benches, a keen eye on Main Street. Sheep knew them all and they gummed out a greeting. He asked after their sex life, a sure-fire opening.

"Not bad."

"Could be worse."

"Been better."

Chunk Bovee shifted his hams on the swing and spat at the geranium in the Folger's Coffee can, missing. Earl Normandy picked up the tattered copy of *The Fountainhead*, his only reading. Sheep was invited to take a pew. Lazily, he uttered a few judgments about the dry spell and the new Commie policies of the Antichrist in Washington, D.C. As always, such criticism proved popular.

"Country's being flushed down the spout by the Welfare program," observed Earl Normandy, the most politically aware of the porch bunch. "Might as well sell out to the Rooskies and have done."

Boy, the hotel collie, dragged along the floorboards and performed his only trick, rolling over to show Sheep his giant lavender balls. Grinding Boy's stomach with his boot heel, Sheep thought vaguely about the corncob clap. It might be wise to use a Trojan on these rest days with the Black Hills and, to get right down to it, planking an Indian wasn't the smartest move a Montana politician could make. Still, what could a highly sexed man in the shank of his prime be expected to do? Winn was no fun, and he could hardly knock on Madame Marlyss's door

with a sheaf of bills. She'd probably charge double for ex-husbands, and a Triumph had to have some pride or what else was there?

"No more word on that poor Compass gal, I take it," he said, to prod the conversation into murder and politics.

"Which gal is that?"

"They'll never find Velva Rose Compass," said Earl Normandy over *The Fountainhead*. "Killer burnt the remains, way I see it. Only natural."

"These are violent times," Sheep announced.

"Got to have law and order," Piggy Waldron went so far as to say. "Something to keep the womenfolk safe from studs like our Chunk here."

"Haw," spat Chunk.

"With Madame Marlyss in town," Sheep continued carefully, "we've got to expect nothing but crime in the streets."

Everybody looked at the street. A single car passed. On the far corner, a cowhand lounged in front of the Thunderbird Bar and Grill with a can of Coors, staring. Two Indians slept at the curb.

"It's your TV destroying public morals," said Earl Normandy. "Look at Mayor Luce. Ought to have known old Cora Mae's husband was a mean hand with a Winchester."

"How much ass you reckon the mayor chewed off?" Piggy Waldron wanted to know. "Lessee. There was Cora Mae, and that Finlay woman, and old Wildcat Wanda that works at the Tastee Freez."

"I never knew he got to Wanda."

"If he ain't, he's the only one that never."

"Haw."

They went on racking up Mayor Luce's unofficial score,

and Sheep arose in despair and doubt. Their hooded eyes had given no definite message and the craggy faces, tanned to leather from whiskey and outdoor sitting, had certainly stayed poker. But he'd heard them anyway. The Triumph Place was sacred ground, and as far as the Last Stand porch was concerned, the whorehouse murder was no platform on which to base a campaign thrust. It occurred to him that some of these old turkeys might have been with Marlyss, for they had both the cash and the letch, and any Finn whore would roll on her back for a dollar. With a shudder of disgust, he hurried off to his car, followed by Boy wagging his tail and panting for love.

At home, he gunned his Impala up to the rim of the wishing well, and then noticed Winn, still upright at sunset, mixing drinks at the boulder bar in her hostess gown. The barbecue. He wanted a big party to test his chances as mayor, but there was no taste in his mouth for political inquiry tonight. Might as well let Madame Marlyss keep control of the town, since she owned most of it anyway. Bitterly, he flung back the car door and walked into the sour afternoon air. The sky glowered a dull liverish color in the west and the air smelled of decaying weeds, a bad sign. Bearing a silver fizz, Winn glided forward across the flagstones in the droopy white scrap of cloth, a designer original, ordered at great expense from Dayton's.

"Have a good day, dear?" she screamed.

"Tolerable."

They were not alone. With a start, he noted a dark, smiling face with braids looming behind the chaise longue.

"My God, who's that?"

"I told you he'd forget," Winn trilled gaily, and the newcomer giggled, hanging her head. "Isn't she adorable,

Sheep? We went shopping today and bought the cutest clothes. The Western Look, all the rage Back East. Come out, Arleen, and show my husband your new outfit."

Timidly, the girl shuffled on beaded moccasins as far as the rotisserie, as Winn exclaimed about the long ruffled denim skirt and the organdy senorita blouse.

"How much was it?" Sheep asked.

"I paid on VISA."

"Credit cards don't mean it's free. The bills come at the end of the month all the same."

It was the tired old fight they always had over money, and his head ached from it. A maid! Here he was on the road to the poorhouse, his capital tied up in dirty fuel, not a cent in the bank, imported crap pouring in from all the ripoff luxury stores of Dallas, Minneapolis, Denver, New York, and Honolulu, and his wife had hired a servant, as if she were Lady Astor.

"Winn, we have to talk."

"Go to the fridge, Darleen, and get Mr. Triumph one of those Great Falls Selects, there's a good girl."

The maid broke into a run as if wild dogs pursued her, and his sharp eye saw that there was a good, solid, roly-poly body beneath the frills of the Western Look. Still, somebody in this world had to have common sense, so he said, "We can't afford her, Winn."

"You've been with a woman. I can tell."

"Nobody else in Hebb has servants."

"That shaving lotion doesn't fool me."

His wife was close to him now, the cords of her throat tense and her voice low with anger. Maybe a musk cologne next time. They said it was stronger. She grabbed his lapel and pinned him down with stoned, implacable eyes.

"Yes, a woman, and while you're in town humping one of your sluts, think of me out here all alone with a million people coming to a barbecue. I need a person here, Sheep. I mean to keep her. You owe me that."

"What's her salary?"

"It's all arranged with the Mission. She's staying, Sheep. She's a diamond in the rough, but I need her. After all, you never gave me children of my own."

It was a body blow and he backed away, saying okay, okay.

"If you think I enjoy giving these damned barbecues —"

"I said *okay.*"

She let loose then and went back to the warming oven by the boulder bar, slicing French bread with little karate chops of a carbon-steel knife imported from Stockholm. Their diamond in the rough stumbled out of the kitchen, knocking over a row of carved wooden ducks and leveling a pot of ivy, to offer him a can of warm beer. He thanked her, but she stayed to watch, saucer-eyed behind the thick glasses, as he took the first sip.

"It's very nice," Sheep acknowledged.

"Oh thank you, sir!"

With a happy smile, she turned and barreled away into the petunias, leaving behind a single beaded moccasin on the flagstones. How different life would have been, Sheep thought, gazing across the miniature golf course to the dreary sky, if things had worked out with Marlyss. He saw a bedroom, a scalp shining with ash-blonde Finnish hair. His fingers remembered stroking a narrow slant of pelvis, tracking the constellation of moles, the only marks on her white Scandinavian body beyond the ordinary. Twenty-odd years ago. Sexually, she'd be far more expert now,

with all her whore's training. And financially she had him beat too, unless she'd been dumb enough to invest in the dirty fuels game herself.

"Coal," said the low voice of doom at his ear.

"What's that?"

"Miz Triumph says you should start the coal."

"The charcoal. Yes, I guess I should."

He gave the maid a quick once-over, but after Mount Rushmore it looked too tame and harmless for a second glance. If Winn had chosen this yo-yo so he'd keep his hands to himself, she could stop fretting. He got the bag of briquettes from the storehouse and faced the rotisserie, the girl trotting behind like animated laundry. "That'll be all, Loreen," he hinted, as she faced him at every turn. "I'm sure you'll get along here, working for such a historic family. Did you ever hear of the Triumph name before?"

"Oh yessir. Father Grady said it was the best family in all southeastern Montana."

Well now, she wasn't such a bad little critter after all, he thought. Surely a Triumph owed Hebb some leadership, after the town had been dragged down the garden path by such moral degenerates as Mayor Luce and Madame Marlyss.

"And I bet Miz Triumph's a byword."

"Miz Triumph?" Sheep asked darkly. So even the Indians knew!

"She's so generous and nice and she buys so many things!" Loreen pointed lovingly to Winn, who was now guzzling straight Beefeaters at the boulder bar, and Sheep felt the bile flow. He'd have to run for mayor. God help the man who was known only for his wives, and at fifty, he had reached that dangerous age when a man decides

he wants fame, after failing at love, marriage, kids, money, and all the rest of it.

3

At sunset, Loreen went to the fowl pen behind the storehouse and flung garlic bread to the swans. It was muggy weather now, the sun a gold blur over Pyramid Butte and the sky as purple as statues wrapped for Lent. She could smell sage sharp in the air and knew it was going to rain, but she didn't care. Despite her most grievious faults, God had brought her to the Promised Land.

Mr. Triumph was kind of growly, but oh, Mrs. Triumph! Fervently, Loreen pressed the scapular medal under her new blouse, still boxy with fabric sizing — the Western Look, which was In. Call me Winn, dear, Winn had said. She had put an arm around her at J. C. Penny, and in the basement with the Indian plaid curtains, had braided her hair. Loreen held her head high as geese came from under the storehouse to screech and squabble, for the braids unwove into a pile of frazz if you didn't watch out. The next day, Winn had promised, she would start using Alberto VO5 hot oil treatments, like world-famous Rula Lenska on TV.

Chickens raced the pen for their share of garlic bread and Loreen threw out more, casting upon the waters.

God's grace just stormed down if you were in a good patch! Not only had Winn pressed her close, but there had been Main Street, a paradise of stores just bursting with things to buy and Mrs. Triumph had done her best to buy everything. The Mission tuck store was small potatoes in comparison, though she'd have to be on the lookout for avarice, which was greed, not to mention envy, gluttony, and pride, the mother of these. It was the soul alone that counted in this vale of tears.

In fact, there were two Sorrowful Mysteries. She was sure it had been Mary Twotrees's T-shirt on the corner among the other Indians, for only Mary had seen the Black Hills. A true friend would have asked Mrs. Triumph to stop the station wagon as a Samaritan. A Christian brethren would have invited Mary for a ride to show how much nicer virtue was than cocktail hostessing. But Mary had looked so unhappy and tired at the curb, and besides, it was only Loreen's first day. There was time enough for charity. Nevertheless she said a quick Act of Contrition to the birds as they honked and spat.

The second mystery was not so bad either. No blood again, her second month, but maybe God had seen the light and had made her go virgin again. Miracles sprouted all over the place these days and it was probably better to be a nun without the blood, what with woolly robes and all that kneeling. Cheered, Loreen turned to go back, her feet feeling naked in the new moccasins. Some of the Mission girls made moccasins with quills, taking the designs from Ford, Chevrolet, and Thunderbird, and they were sold in the nuns' hobby shop, but Loreen had never worn anything better than thongs or tennis shoes. Moccasins were way too expensive for the Indians.

Loreen stopped dead, letting the garlic bread drop

to her feet. There was a man in the shadows coming closer.

"No," she wailed, holding her scarred arm, but it wasn't Pa at all. Only Mr. Triumph coming from behind the trellis in his chef's hat and his apron with the funny sayings.

"Winn wants you now," he said. "The guests are arriving."

Loreen beamed with relief, and saw that his face was really beautiful with the big hound eyes, like St. Joseph in the chapel, the statue nobody ever prayed to, what with Mary and Jesus up for grabs.

"Look, I'm sorry if I seemed unfriendly at first," Mr. Triumph went on. "Of course you can stay here, if you do your work. Anyway, I guess I can afford you for one night."

He said it in the nicest way, and Loreen just wanted to crash herself against his apron for the relief of it. He didn't fool her one bit with his talk about affording. Anybody who owned a miniature golf course could afford to hire the whole Reservation. No, he hadn't liked her right away, and now he did. It was Sanctifying Grace for sure, oozing in and sneaking around at the hearts of man. She had God alone to thank — Him and the way she just seemed to grow on people.

"It won't be easy tonight," he said. "There's a mob coming, a lot of important bigwigs. If you have any trouble, you tell me about it."

"Yessir, I will!"

He studied her for a moment.

"How much did that outfit cost?" he asked.

"Hundreds and hundreds," she said, not knowing exactly, but he seemed satisfied, for he just grunted and took off without another word. She knew he would like her all

the more after this night, for she aimed to do her very best. One of the orange-Popsicle cats slunk out from under the storehouse and rubbed against her Western Look dress, purring like the dishwasher. Cold breezes whipped the sweet peas on the chicken wire, and birds' beaks poked through, asking for more. Heinz 57, the German shepherd guard dog, bounded up to nose her in the crotch, and she thought, how true the words of Father Grady. From darkness, you rolled the stone away. Like Lazarus, you emerged. Like Eve from a rib, you ran off scraping clay in the sunshine, the apples not rotted yet, the snake undreamt of.

PART THREE

The Barbecue

I

It was just going on nine, but already Flo had crashed like the Hindenburg over the Triumphs' petunias. Senator Struthers and Barney Peavey were trying to jimmy her back up into the hammock, but she hollered that goddamn, she'd pee her panties if they didn't stop making her laugh, and whoo-ee boys, better not press too hard, she was horny as a three-peckered owl. Quietly, Niles moved behind the potted juniper. It was his own lawful-wedded wife floundering out there in the lime pantsuit, but he didn't bust his ass to offer services. After twenty-odd years of seeing Flo get bombed, talk dirty, and wreck the furniture at parties, the magic had kind of gone out of their marriage.

A fine grit blew in on a wind from the gravel pit and Niles gulped his drink to ward off chill. As usual, the poison served at the Triumphs' was gourmet, some variety of piss milkshake called a silver fizz, meant for ladies and pansies. He'd downed about a gallon since sunset, mainly for the food value, since the Triumphs never let a body get anywhere near the eats until the folks were too snocked to care. Probably just as well. Dinner would be some rabbitty salad or cheese-dunk fondue, all gourmet, with nothing for the inner man to get his teeth into.

His hostess hurried past with paper towels for Flo's accident, and Niles shoved a hand in his Levis to move

things around. Caught in a wind-devil, Winn's flimsy dress blew flat against her body, showing every rise and hollow. Now there was class, Niles thought. A person could find the bone on Winn Triumph, unlike some fat slobs he could name. "Nut balls?" asked a loud voice, and Niles whipped his hand from his pocket so fast he got a wrist burn, but it was only the Triumphs' maid, another crazy gourmet idea, dragging the Indians into town as if the Reservation wasn't close enough to catch fleas.

"Christ, scare me to death why don't you?" he said, with a wink and a quick up-and-down look. Not too bad, if you weren't sick to death of overripe women, but the face wasn't much to write home about and they'd dolled her up in some dude outfit like Minnie Pearl. Holding out a wooden pineapple stuck with cocktail picks, she told him, "These here's your nut balls, which is Philadelphia rolled over into wads with meats. These here is called a 'chovy flower."

"That a fact? What's the bugs?"

"Ain't no bugs. Them's your smoked oysters."

"Looks like roast grasshoppers to me."

"Well, it ain't." Her eyes were solemn behind the thick glasses, but he'd never known an Indian to get the gist of a joke. "Miz Triumph imported these here from Seattle. I can show you the can inside."

"Honey, I don't need no can, just point me to the bushes."

He chuckled to let her know he meant to be joshing, but she gaped like a heifer by the side of the road. He wondered if Winn hadn't hired a simpleton on purpose, so's Sheep wouldn't stray from the fold. Christ knew, any man'd be safe with this one.

"Betsy-Wetsy doll!" Flo suddenly shrieked from the

hammock. He turned to see her great green buns heave up and vanish behind the rotisserie. The others hee-hawed fit to bursting, but what else could they do? His wife was hell-bent on being the laughingstock of the county and doing a bangup job of it. He cast his mind back, trying to pinpoint the time she had first started to wet herself in public. Funny things happened to a woman's parts once the kids left home. It went hand in glove with the way she couldn't ever get enough, flumping over him in bed like a buffalo as his brothers' wives lay awake downstairs with all ears cocked. But then, he'd read an article in "Penthouse Forum" that explained about women getting all the hungrier with age as men slid the downward slope to the prostate and beyond. There was surely no justice in nature.

"Change my ditey!" pierced the night, and he said to Loreen, "That's my little woman. The one in the blonde bangs and the big uplift. Used to have an hourglass figure, but the sand all sunk to the bottom."

Loreen didn't understand the joke, although Niles couldn't much blame her. Nothing too funny about Flo when you got right down to her. Out at the ranch she sat on her wazoo all day, eating Twinkies and reading *People* magazine, while Faye and Mavourneen did all the housework. Drank enough beer to float a Liberian tanker. Not like Winn, who packed away her liquor without adding a pound, which just went to show what class from Back East was all about.

He thought of their one-night stand in Cancun, Winn shuddering silently underneath, not like Flo, who always clung and bellowed for all the house to hear. Afterward, Winn had downed three margaritas and passed out on the tiles in her stiff, dignified way. Damn, but there was sure

one thing on his mind tonight! He squinted into the drink. Loreen seemed to be whispering some kind of prayer, so he roused her attention with a fanny slap and asked, "What's in this shit, anyways?"

"Gin, mostly," she told him. "And your whipped egg whites."

Well that explained his mood sure as shooting. Egg whites, being straight albumin, ranked high in "Penthouse Forum" for pumping up sperm count, along with bananas, lichee nuts, and oysters. He'd never even seen a lichee nut, so it had to be the silver fizzes. Oysters. Carefully he selected one of the roast bugs from Loreen's wooden pineapple. Didn't look nearly white enough for sperm count, but then they were smoked, no doubt to preserve the albumin.

"Loreen, shouldn't you be circulating?" came Winn's frosty voice. "Niles here isn't our only guest."

"She was just feeding me an oyster," he said with a grin. "For the sperm count."

"Oh God, Niles, you must be drunk," she snapped, sweeping on past like the *Queen Mary*. He couldn't figure out why she'd been so standoffish since Cancun, although he had to admit his technique hadn't been any too sensuous that night, just ramming it in. A gal from Back East expected a hot technique, especially nowadays when they read the ladies' magazines about how their organs worked and full satisfaction. Now if he could just get her cornered again, he'd show her a trick or two. He'd been doing a lot of reading, and knew that it was the clitoris that was all the rage Back East.

"Hey Red Wing. Go tell your sexy lady friend that I'd like a private talk."

"What sexy lady?"

"Winn Triumph ain't but the only sexy lady I can see hereabouts."

"You just talked to her."

"Are you the maid or what? Tell her to meet Niles Hardesty in the storehouse yonder, and say it's real important."

The girl gawped as if she didn't have a brain. Then Niles saw how the land lay and fished a five from his billfold, spearing it over the nut ball pick. "Guess you squaws won't do nothing without a buck, hey? Get it?"

She didn't seem to, so he tried one last time, huddling close and singing low and dirty into her ear:

"There once was an Injun maid
Who said she wasn't afraid
To lay on her back in any old shack
And let a cowboy straddle her crack.
One day to her surprise
She saw her belly rise . . ."

As if goosed by a pitchfork, Loreen jerked away, dropping her pineapple. It bounced once, scattering nut balls and 'chovy flowers, then rolled down the patio like the tumbling tumbleweed. The girl raced after it, moaning "Near Occasion of Sin," and Niles shook his head. It was sad to see how Indians fell apart on their first contact with white technology and culture, which just went to show how the taxpayers' dollar was thrown down the tubes in trying to educate savages to the American way. Niles barely had time to think this when he heard the catcalls coming at him from the other guests.

"We saw you, lover boy," hollered Chanel Potts.

"Say Flo, you better watch that man."

"Seems to go for the dark meat, don't he?"

"Whoo-ee, can't keep his hands to hisself."

Getting into the spirit, Niles went woo-woo-woo in a tommyhawk yell and did a little war dance on the way over to join them. One eye on the storehouse, he chewed a bite of the smoked oyster, but spat it out again real quick into the petunias. Pure soap eraser, and besides, the way he felt tonight, no need for extra sperm count; he was one hot silver fizz of albumin already, and no looking backward once Niles Hardesty's engines started to fire up and turn over.

2

"It's ROMAINE," Winn told the girl under the blinking fluorescent tubes in the kitchen. "Safeway gets it for me on special order. God alone knows why I bother."

"Nome."

"It's meat-and-potatoes country out here. Nobody ever heard of a fresh vegetable, which is why they all age so quickly. God knows, I try my best."

"Yessum."

Winn rubbed her giant salad bowl with garlic, as Loreen's stubby fingers tore lettuce into strips, and very neatly for the first time, considering. Winn decided she would overlook the accident with the hors d'oeuvre tray, although the cream cheese might be hard to scrape off the chaise longue and the wooden pineapple was cracked beyond repair. It had probably been Niles's fault, disgusting man. Certainly Loreen looked much more attractive

than before in her Western outfit, although Winn was puzzled by the white shoestrings over the girl's shoulders, visible under her blouse. Could it be some kind of Mission brassiere? Perhaps a touch of frosted lipstick and a light rouge would give the face more oomph. Oh, there were so many tips she could pass on to Maureen, as their friendship matured into mutual respect.

"In the better circles," she said, opening the anchovies, "a Caesar salad is considered more than enough for a decent meal. But Hebb is not the better circles. I served a Caesar salad by itself one night and, of course, they just wolfed it right down and waited for the meat course. We had to open cans of chili, but that's the story of my life."

The fluorescent tubes hissed and flickered, and she thought, oh God, not the generator again. It always knew when a storm was coming and rain would be just her luck. Glass-rings and cigarette burns still marred the living room from the last party and an odd bathroom smell was forever embedded in the couch where Flo had passed out. She would have to make sure that Flo sat on something vinyl tonight without being obvious about it. The hammock was probably ruined already. Oh God, being a hostess in Montana was so complex! Automatically, her hand reached for the pill bottle hidden among the cactuses on the window — but no, she'd already popped her hour's ration of Valium after Niles's vulgar remark about his sperm count. What could he have meant, exactly? Any real gentleman would have overlooked her rash slip in Cancun, but no sense looking for a gentleman out here. You were lucky enough to find decent lettuce.

Of course, she had been bombed that night and totally desperate. Her fortieth birthday, didn't a woman deserve some arms around her in a watershed like that? But Niles

Hardesty! His terrible pink wattles! His bandy legs and that awful personality! In the very next hacienda apartment, Sheep and Flo had been writhing in agony from Dramamine and Montezuma's Revenge, or it never would have happened, ever. Time and again, she had begged Sheep not to invite the Hardestys to her social evenings, but male friendships based on high school beerbusts and shady real estate deals seemed to be iron-clad in Montana, no matter how loathesome the individual parties.

Thunder and lightning ricocheted through the night sky. Might as well eat before the monsoons. Winn threw olive oil into the electric wok and added croutons for sauté. She always made her own croutons from scratch, not that anybody in God's Country knew or cared what a crouton was. Going heavy on the Parmesan, she wondered how her husband would react if he found out about that moment of madness in Cancun. Serve him right, with all his easy ladies in town, but what if she should ever give up and file for divorce? It was best to start alimony suits from a high moral ground. Sheep probably knew about Niles anyway. They both were no doubt cackling about her performance in bed this very moment, at the rotisserie. God but men were awful. She glanced tenderly at Loreen, who was shredding and tearing romaine into tiny bits like one possessed. Some day she would have to ask about the insane father and have a serious in-depth talk, woman to woman.

Going around the island stove to congratulate Marlene on the salad and to make her stop, Winn noticed that some green lizardy thing was feeding on the remains of the wooden pineapple. A shudder went through her whole body. God knew what kind of deadly poisonous reptile had sought shelter from the storm tonight. One spring,

Winn had discovered a pregnant rattlesnake nesting under the warming oven on the patio and she had dreamed of crawling things for weeks afterward. Squeamishly, she moved closer, but it was only money.

"Noreen, what's this five dollar bill doing here?"

"Oh ma'am, I forgot. It's from that man. In the blue jeans. The one with the red face."

"Mr. Hardesty, you mean?"

"Got this neck like a turkey."

"I know who you mean, dear, but you are not to accept tips from the guests. This isn't a nightclub."

"Oh nome. It ain't for me. It's for you."

"Five dollars? You must have misunderstood."

"He says you're supposed to come to the storehouse as a sexy lady."

"Well, let's not talk about it," Winn said, furious. Of course it would be Niles Hardesty's idea of a joke with his sniggery cowboy sense of humor. Or did he really mean to imply she was worth only five dollars? Her eyes stung from humiliation and smoke as the croutons began to blacken in the sizzling wok. "Niles meant that money as a tip for you, Maureen. That's how it was."

"Oh nome. He don't like me. He sang me this song about an Indian maid."

"I don't want to hear another word," Winn insisted, but the girl began chanting in a somber, off-key voice.

"There once was an Indian maid, who said she wasn't afraid —"

"That will do, Doreen," Winn ordered, shaking with rage. How dare Niles Hardesty fill this innocent girl's mind with his smut! And what else had he told her? About Cancun, more than likely. That would be just his style.

"— and let a cowboy straddle her crack —"

"Doreen!"

"— one day to her surprise —"

Winn slapped her hard. "Crow slut!" she cried, out of control. The girl recoiled, the glasses sliding to her nose and falling soundlessly to the Monsanto floor. Instantly ashamed, Winn picked them up and fitted each chewed wing over Loreen's ears as the baffled brown eyes grew wider and wider. Unable to bear it another minute, Winn made a dash for the windowsill then, and gulped down a Valium with a bourbon chaser straight from the bottle.

"Forgive me, Loreen. I've been on edge lately."

"It wasn't no lie, Miz Triumph. That was the very song. He got real close to my ear, and —"

"I'm sure you have the right song and I believe that you have told me the truth, as you perceive it. But now I want you to forget every word Niles Hardesty said to you. You don't understand Niles. He has a very dry sense of humor."

"Yessum."

Bleakly, Winn gazed into the night, where Flo was doing a hootchy-kootchy number under the amber insect lamps. Niles, that snake in the grass, was entertaining Mavis Struthers with his dry sense of humor by the chip-dip. Sheep squirted charcoal starter into the rotisserie. The coast was clear, and she had to take action, but oh God. Jaw set, she lifted the five dollar bill from its toothpick, slipping it deftly down her cleavage. It felt clammy from shrimp mayonnaise, but it would not be staying there long.

"Now listen to me, Darlene. After I make the salad, take it out to the big pine table. Tell Mr. Hardesty to meet me in the storehouse in five minutes, and not a word

about it to anyone else, hear? I plan to return his extravagant tip in person."

"Yessum."

Fiercely, Winn flung raw egg, anchovies, oil, vinegar, cheese, the nearest spices, and handfuls of black croutons, hard as rocks, over the shredded mulch of romaine. She kneaded the mess together with bare hands, stomach churning at the result, but her guests would be dining by candlelight, too juiced to notice the difference. God knew why she was worried. They'd probably love it. They'd ask for the recipe. With her luck, this would be the most memorable gourmet experience of the Hebb summer season.

3

"They go to the bathroom right there in the streets," said Mavis Struthers, who sometimes accompanied the senator on fact-finding trips abroad. "I thought I would just die."

"Honestly," said Chanel Potts. "Sheep, can you beat that? In the streets!"

"And then use their fingers to wipe."

"Isn't that the limit!"

Foreign politics was one thing, but Sheep was finding it hard to scrape up any Gallup-poll opinions on the local issues. Senator Struthers had not even heard of the whorehouse murder, and had talked all night about fairways

he had golfed at home and abroad. Sheep sidled over to the boulder bar to hear what held Barney Peavey and Fred "Bubbs" Beaumont in such a deep conversation.

"So I says, I ain't paying no fifty dollars to get a cesspool cleaned without a written guarantee."

"Highway robbery."

"So he says, 'I'll rent you the brushes, and you can scrub the shit out for yourself.' "

"Hee hee."

"So I says, 'You can take them brushes and stick them where the sun don't shine, buster, because I don't take no . . .' "

Of course, parties were designed so you could escape everyday cares, but a person might expect senators, chiropractors, and bankers to discuss something more serious than the bodily functions. As Sheep drank his silver fizz, it struck him that none of his friends had ever mentioned Marlyss in his presence. Was it just good breeding, or had people actually forgotten he had once been married to the local madame? Twenty years was a long time, but the way she had deserted him had surely been a landmark public event, like Watergate or the Guyana Massacre. Boldly sticking his neck out, he went up to Enid Peavey and Vy Butke and said, "I hear Madame Marlyss is pretty upset by all the bad publicity."

"Just a second, Sheep," chattered Enid. "I was telling Vy about the robes sticking out at the Shale County graduation. And there they were marching proud as punch to 'Pomp and Circumstance,' and not a one of them legally married yet, and I says to Myrtle, I says, now there's a comment on our permissive society for you, and didn't they ever hear of the pill? I mean, they're high school graduates."

The sky, an ash-green bruise over Pyramid Butte, emitted an angry rumble, and Sheep gloomily returned to his post at the rotisserie. As usual, the briquettes still lay in black mourning with only a grayish mold at the edges for all his matches and Char-Start. Some men were born for barbecues, others had it dumped upon them, but he'd always managed to start a fire when they had used a simple pit like everybody else. Naturally Winn had to order something with a French name that didn't work. Where the hell was she, anyway? He was starving.

At least the Caesar salad was on its way. He watched Loreen run a mile-a-minute down the patio with the big wooden bowl, and then stop short to say something to Niles Hardesty. "So she's ready, is she?" Niles called, slapping his thigh with a whoop and heading back to the picnic table. Sheep knitted his brow. He'd never seen Niles excited about salad before.

"Loreen, what did you just tell Mr. Hardesty?" Sheep asked, going over to her. "Does Winn have the ribs ready?"

The girl froze in her tracks and stared wildly round to the storehouse.

"What is it, girl? Don't be so shy, you can tell me."

"Not a word to no one," she groaned.

"Loreen, what's wrong? You look kind of peaked."

Lightning suddenly flashed across the patio. Loreen screamed and cast the salad bowl out over the hammock, where it hit the flagstones and spun like a top, miraculously upright and intact.

"Through my grievious fault," she cried, making a sign of the cross as more fireworks crackled across the sky. Raindrops were pelting the rotisserie hood now, hissing

out the few feeble live coals within, and guests scattered for shelter with shrieks of delight.

"Go on inside, Loreen. The salad's all right."

"Oh Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph!"

"Can't you hear me? Where the hell is Winn, anyway?"

"Oh don't make me say. I promised, not a word!"

"Loreen!"

"My most grievious fault!"

She backed away into the hammock, overturning it where even Flo had failed and finishing off the salad bowl at last. Then she fled heavily into the night as blown napkins gusted by her on the wind and the sky burst open with a gully-washer and a trash-mover. The rain snuffed the citronella candles in their netted jars and the generator blacked out for a few minutes, as guests slipped and sprawled on their wet way into the house. Goddamn! thought Sheep, reaching for the nearest abandoned drink. It was one helluva way to kick off a political career.

4

UNDER THE PATIO UMBRELLA, Flo drank black coffee and kept an eagle eye out. After the first downpour, the rain had slacked to a drizzle, but the other guests had moved the party inside, thumbing through the Triumphs' dirty picture books of the Hindu temples, which Flo had seen a million times. Moccasins slapped the flagstones as the Indian girl came toward her with the percolator. Flo

took a refill, although she was sober enough now. She always stayed sober down deep, if folks only realized, playing drunk on the outside, a good-time gal, as was expected from any two-ton Tessie. Nonetheless, her wits had been steady enough to spot Niles creeping out behind the carriganas to that old garage Winn called the storehouse as if it were some big deal. When he had stopped and scratched his privates in that hearty way, Flo had recognized the handwriting on the wall. Men had their needs and she understood the floozies and country hotpants he tumbled on back roads, but to do it at Winn Triumph's fancy barbecue was a downright insult to their marriage vows.

She reached over to the bar, a big ugly rock set on some toilet pipe, and spiked the coffee with Jim Beam. Then it happened. Winn Triumph appeared at the kitchen door, looked both ways, and tippy-toed through the wet grass to the storehouse, her white hostess dress dragging behind as if she were the Curse of the Vampire.

"See that?" Flo asked Loreen. "Know who that was?"

The girl stood like a wooden Indian in a cigar store, her eyes fixed on the far beyond.

"That was your big boss-lady gone to meet my husband. One guess what they're doing in there."

The Indian goggled.

"In front of God and everybody, might as well do it in the streets. And there's her poor husband out there at the pit trying to fire up them coals that got all soaked. But does she give a damn? Must be in heat."

"It's my fault," whispered the girl. "My most grievious fault."

Flo shifted uncomfortably. Crazy as a coot, but what could you expect these days from Indians that spent half

their time out on the Reserve chewing mushrooms and smoking drug-weeds at the taxpayers' expense? Oh yes, they got an easy ride, while old Flo Hardesty, an honest white woman, had to pick up the leavings in this life.

"Nobody gives a crap about me," she declared. "A faithful wife don't mean beans in this society. I just get to set my days away at the ranch while Niles goes lolly-gagging. Nothing to do but talk with them dumb bunny in-laws of mine and go stark out of my head."

She thought bitterly of the ranch. They would be finished eating now in the big kitchen, not a word nor a sound except slurping and belching. Faye and Mavourneen would be with the pots and pans at the dishwasher, hugging their pastel cardigans as if they were bone-cold, which was probably the case. Niles's brothers, the hands, and all the backward kids would be wiping up their plates of Karo with slices of Wonder Bread. Her own kids never came home to visit the ranch and Flo didn't blame them one bit: Leedice and Lavonne had both taken the dental hygiene career route up in Billings and were used to the Good Life. The Good Life at the ranch was slabs of beef fried in water, and cold watery tomatoes, and boiled potatoes with Parkay, and waterlogged tapioca, and, to drink, water. After dinner, reruns on rural TV or talk about the cattle blight. Flo, for one, was fed up to the teeth, and it dawned on her that the tool for getting away from the ranch and into a condominium in Hebb lay right before her very eyes in the storehouse, if she played her cards real crafty and mean.

She touched Loreen on the arm and the girl gasped.

"Oh simmer down and listen hard. Think you could go tell Sheep Triumph his wife needs him right away, in the storehouse?"

"Holy Mother of God."

"Now don't you look so dumb at me. There's twenty bucks in it if you do what I say. My purse is indoors, but old Flo keeps her word, you ask anybody."

What could be wrong with the girl? She stared and stared like some woodchuck flushed from the burrow, and didn't even have the brains to come under the patio umbrella and out of the rain.

"The storehouse," Flo repeated. "What's your problem, honey? Ain't twenty dollars enough?"

"We don't take tips here. It's not a nightclub."

"Well, pardon me for living." God take the girl, she was just about as goofy as one of Niles's nieces and nephews, always gawking at you like you'd climbed out of some sewer. Of course, they all loved big Flo, and wasn't she jolly enough, always giving the little bastards birthday presents from the Saddle Shoppe? Nothing else to do at the ranch but give birthday presents, what with hubby out humping the country talent. And did he ever choose to take a hump of his own lawful wedded, oh no, not our Niles! Some scrawny bag of bones like Winn Triumph, that was his speed, not a real woman.

"So if you're too high and mighty for cash, how's about the barter system?" she wheedled, unpinning her brooch of Black Hills gold with the agate chips glued down in the shape of an arrow. Just cheap costume junk it was, her big birthday present from Niles, while his fast lady friends received the diamonds and mink, if he ever gave them a thing. Flo pressed the brooch into the girl's hand, and Loreen began breathing hard as if she was about to throw a fit. "Now calm down. Just tell Sheep he's wanted in the storehouse. Don't say it was me that sent you. Figure you can do that? Figure you're smart enough?"

"Where's the meat around here?" Senator Struthers roared, wobbling through the mist. "Hey, you there, Murine, can't you bring those ribs I see stacked up in the kitchen and take them to our chef? I'm hungry enough to swallow a buffalo."

"Yessir."

"Don't you look at me, senator," crowed Flo in her usual fun way that always got them. "I ain't on the menu tonight."

They both had a big laugh. Then she noticed that Loreen had disappeared, leaving the brooch behind. Probably wanted the earrings too and was holding out, Flo decided. The senator, drunk as a skunk, started telling her about some golf course he'd played in Georgia, with professional sandtraps and water hazards, but Flo just pretended to listen, a clear bead on the storehouse. Faint, rosy light glowed at the curtains. Tarnation, there wasn't much time. Niles was never one to linger, Flo recalled. Then a loud yell rent the night and a whoosh of yellow flame waved back and forth like a signal from the barbecue. Sheep Triumph's hand looked to be entirely on fire.

"Don't you do it!" cried Loreen's banshee voice, as she galumphed past with a tray of raw ribs. "It's the sin of suicidal despair, deadliest of the Seven!"

Goddamn, thought Flo, getting up. Served her right for trusting an Indian to do the dirty work. If she wanted a condominium in town, she'd have to push Sheep into the storehouse all by herself.

5

Sheep doused his hand in the pitcher of silver fizzes, swearing a blue streak. They had warned him about spurting Char-Start on a live bed of coals, but who would have guessed the dead black lumps were alive? He shook the hand briskly in the cold night air, seeing that the burn was only third-degree around the wrist where the cuff had caught fire. Then he heard a slop of wet moccasins as Loreen rushed up and dumped an entire tray of prime ribs into the rotisserie, which bushed up once again into spectacular living flame.

"Don't you set fire to yourself, Mr. Triumph," she wailed. "Think on St. Lawrence that got grilled alive."

"Have you gone plumb loco?"

"It was my most grievious fault."

He yelped as she grabbed his burned hand, babbling on and on about how she hadn't meant to tell, but Mrs. Triumph made her tell, and it wasn't the five dollars nor even the twenty, but her grievious fault. There was something about roasted bugs and shacks which he didn't quite get.

"Let go, Loreen!"

"Jelly's best for a burn," Flo Hardesty interrupted, hurrying up with a drunken Senator Struthers. "Don't

Winn keep that chokecherry jam of hers in the storehouse?"

"I'll get it!" Loreen offered, letting go at last.

"You don't know where it is, child," Flo snapped. "Mr. Triumph better go find it himself."

"Point me the way!" Loreen begged, lunging for his seared wrist, which he whipped away just in time. What the hell was wrong with everybody? With his good hand he tore off the soaked chef's hat and the comedy apron and flung them on the overturned hammock, now covered with drenched Caesar salad. He'd just about had enough of gracious California style living.

"Where's Winn?" he grunted.

"Better look after that burn, Sheep," Flo said. "It's gonna fester and pus."

"I'll get the jelly!"

"I'm all right," he shouted, losing his temper. The expensive ribs, imported from an ad in the *Billings Gazette*, sizzled to a crisp among the charcoal, and angrily he picked up a turning fork to flip them over. Maybe he could pretend they were well-done. A tug at his elbow. Loreen again. "Dammit, leave me alone!"

"Don't go to the storehouse, Mr. Triumph. Let me."

"You keep out of this, butterball," Flo Hardesty ordered, and Sheep wondered if the whole world had gone mad.

"I don't need any damn chokecherry jelly. It's only a singe."

"Not the storehouse!"

As he moved to the silver fizz, which he sorely needed, Loreen flung herself in his path, blocking the way. Her hair hung in plastered straggles over the broad face, her eyes behind the huge glasses were glittering and desperate. Clearly she had cracked up. "Take it easy," he

soothed, as if to a mad dog. Then he remembered the gentle words spoken by the Mount Rushmore Indian in the hotel room that afternoon. Native words would calm her down a bit. *"Epi ha,"* he said, hoping the accent was right, but she bridled as if her toe were caught in a wall socket.

"Epi ha?"

"What's all this Injun palaver?" Flo asked, as Sheep repeated the phrase over and over in a hypnotic way.

"You say *epi ha* to me?" the girl cried. "And after all I done for you?"

"Yes, I say *epi ha,*" Sheep exploded. "Can't you understand plain English?"

Loreen sprang forward, grabbing his burned wrist, and began to drag him across the slick patio flagstones, strong as an ox for one her age. Sheep howled in protest, but her grip was steel and he remembered it was best to let crazy people have their way. The rain began to drive down again, full in his face. He swore to God that next time, politics or not, he'd take everybody to a restaurant. After shouting the Indian phrase a few more times, he tried the other one, *shosta day,* but that didn't butter any parsnips either. On the contrary. Snorting and praying, Loreen pulled harder until they reached the storehouse. She flung the door wide open and stood making the sign of the cross, her glasses fixed like the eyes of Texas upon him, as he stormed inside to find the eternal triangle: his wife, his best friend, and a spread-out hide-a-bed under the shelves of healing, medicinal gourmet jams.

6

It was dawn when they let her go. For a time, Loreen stood on the police station steps, thinking mea culpa, my most grievious fault. But he'd said fuck you, and before that it was slut, and before that, straddle her crack. And Father Grady had sworn that these were the best people in southeastern Montana!

Slowly she walked up Main Street. Under her thin wet moccasins, the sidewalk stretched hard as the valley of the shadow. No sun, but a milky blue smudge in the east. No word, but neon signs with the lights off spread over the bars like cast-off snakeskins. The air sat cold, washed clean by the storm. She stopped at the corner where she had seen Mary Twotrees and she made the sign of the cross. It was thrown away on the darkness. Everyone had gone from her, through her most grievious fault.

The police lady had been real polite, although the click, clack of the typewriter keys still rang in her ears. They told her that skilled nurses at All Souls' Hospital would soon pull the turning fork out of Mr. Hardesty's backside, which was a comfort. And Mrs. Triumph wasn't dead after all but only passed out from pills, silver fizzes, shame, and humiliation. So there was hope. She saw light touch the top of Shale County Savings and Loan, threads of yellow horizon reflected in the windows. God always

brought a new dawning, which was something to ponder.

But Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what she had witnessed this night! Mrs. Triumph naked as a jaybird on the hide-a-bed, and the turkey man with his thing stuck up like a prairie dog on a mound! Then Mr. Triumph had taken the Lord's name in vain and had dug the fork right in. Through my fault, Loreen gasped. Through my most grievious fault!

She quickened to a trot, past the windows that seemed to stare at her spotted soul, the street signs that pointed their fingers in shame. Because of her pride, the most deadly of the Seven Deadly, though they were all equally deadly, a mystery, Mr. Triumph now knew his wife's adultery as the Whore of Babylon and had taken up cudgel against his neighbor. Silence becomes the virtuous, the nuns always lectured, and hadn't she gone and blabbed those messages to everybody, and the police besides? Mr. Hardesty's ass would be whole and sound this day, if it wasn't for her anger and sloth, not that she meant to waste much penance on him. "Oh God forgive," she added, feeling for her scapular medal. And that Mr. Hardesty's thingy was just as red and rough as his face, not a nice smooth one, like Brown's.

No, there was no help! Her mind was a bird's nest of foul sin, one impure thought leading to another. The thing was to run and escape this Sodom and Gomorrah of poked behinds, silver fizzes, and smut songs. Making a right turn at the tracks, she bounded out to the highway like a buck antelope, through a growth of gas stations with prices turning on illuminated poles. A sign glowed green, VACANCY, the handwriting on the wall. Coyote skulls on the Trail's End Motel, staring down with hollow eyes, were plain reminders of the fruits of wickedness. In

a leap, she cleared a barrow ditch and it was open country, with thistle and cheatgrass ripping at her anklets and every dirt clod a straight and narrow place for the toes. Horny as a three-peckered owl, she breathed. Betsy-Wetsy doll.

"Oh Christ be merciful!" She stopped and covered her face with her arms. Before her, the big fat lady with the bangs and the blonde popover on her head barreled through the storehouse door again. With a war whoop, Flo dove at her husband, who lay groaning with the fork in his butt as Mrs. Triumph slid to the floor akimbo. Once again, Loreen got pushed against the kerosene lamp, and fire licked at the curtains. She threw up her arms in an attempt to dispel the visions. "Through my most grievious fault!" she cried to the brightening sky. Her new skirt, the Western Look, caught on wild-rose bramble as she raced onward. The firemen had said it was lucky the whole place hadn't gone up in smoke, so that was another comfort. They guessed the rain had snuffed the fire, but hadn't she found the garden hose and doused everything herself? She had dragged the hose right into the storehouse and sprayed Mr. Triumph, the fat lady, and the stuck husband. She had tried for Mrs. Triumph too, but by then, Winn had already crawled out the door, the hostess gown wrapped around her in shreds, a swan and two chickens skrawking before her.

Loreen slowed down, the moccasins slapping plap, plap, plap as she went uphill on the packed dirt road that led to the top of Pyramid Butte. Meadowlarks beebled in the scrub, last night's water lay yellow in ruts from the sunrise. A water tank rose before her with the words LAVERNE SCREWS FOR FREE in aerosol paint. She turned from this Near Occasion of Sin. Hebb was a

shadow below, smoke hanging like gnats over the Triumph place. No one hurt, after all. The fat lady had never caught Mr. Hardesty, the fork pronging out behind, although she had chased him all over that golf course. Mr. Triumph was okay, though now both his hands were singed. He'd never even thanked her for keeping his charcoals lit and burning when the rains first began and he'd gone inside for more Char-Start. Not a peep of gratitude from anybody for the way she'd run to the phone and yelled "Fire, Police" as the operator kept wanting to know where she was calling from. Those important guests were no help at all, laughing and drunk that way! Sin and sex and fire and evil she had seen, and been called a slut and an Indian maid besides. It wasn't fair.

At the top of the butte, the road shallowed out to a picnic space with bones of fires and beercan tops gleaming like dimes. Now the far buttes were pink and gray and creamy with the sun behind shouldering up, and birds twittered from cottonwoods in the valley. Loreen drank in the air, spicy with sage and wet black-eyed susan. God's beauty was everywhere — except for the dark blot coiled in the arm of the Tongue River, city of the devil. She fell to her knees, tearing the barrettes from her braided hair, and cried:

"Destroy thou it, oh Lord! Don't you see what shit they do in Hebb?"

Her voice echoed in the hush. Somewhere below on the highway, a diesel shifted gears with a squeal, but there was no answer from above. Burying her head in her hands, she said Our Fathers and Hail Marys, asking for a sign.

"Fruit of the womb!" she called. "Be with me in this hour!"

It seemed to get warmer of a sudden. She peeked out from her hands. The sun rose in full glory over the badlands and a mild breeze fanned up from the broad river, smelling of mud and damp greenery. Then came His voice, as soft and Irish as Father Grady's own.

"Now garl, what's all the fuss?"

"I say unto You, destroy it," she cried passionately.

"Oh, Loreen. You can stand there and ask me to destroy this town of five thousand people, who don't know their left hand from their right, and also much cattle?"

"Maybe not the cattle."

"The Lard doesn't work by halves. Take another look."

She had to admit that the town seemed a little nicer now, with the sun on the rooftops, the trees sparkling fresh-washed, and the city water tower with HEBB on it bright as the Eucharist.

"Don't You fool me with no tricks!" She busted open the buttons on her plaid blouse and tore away the scapular medal, flinging it into the weeds. "Don't You know what I just been through?"

"You've got some narve, Loreen Bright Weasel, falling into a snit with the Lard. Think of patient St. Agnes, vargin pure. What of Barnadette of Lards?"

"Yeah, but they never heard no filthy songs nor got called slut nor slapped."

"They endured many a worse thing with patience and fortitude. They were meek and mild in My sarvice, not like some wildcat. They healed the sick and showed Christian marcy."

"When did they get to destroy?"

"That's mainly the Old Testament, child. We're Christians now. Don't give me that look, I always told you sainthood was a hard presarve."

"Well, You can have it."

"Go back to them, Loreen."

"No way."

"You must, to prove yourself My sarvant." The voice was fading now as the sun pressed in, and Loreen had to strain her ears. She was suddenly very tired. "Return to Hebb, Loreen. They need you, garl. They need you."

Loreen sat like a stone for a long time. She saw it all now. Last night had been God's test, and she had flunked every question. Not once had she used the Beatitudes or the Corporate Works of Mercy. The first of these was charity, and she'd hardened her heart into a prune pit. Her faith and hope hadn't been any too hot either. Well, it was a long road to His mercy-seat for sure, and here she'd gone and stumbled at the very first step. She got up, rubbing her knees. The scapular lay in the weeds, its Sacred Heart like a flaming briquette in the sunshine, and she decided to leave the medal there as a kind of pledge. Then, as more traffic noises hummed up from the fallen world below, a thoughtful Loreen Bright Weasel made her way down the mountain.

PART FOUR

The Scarlet Woman

I

"Cattle Call Roundup," the weekend society column of the *Hebb World,* was stuck on the inside back page with the beef prices, deaths, and Blondie. Downtown Hebb gave the column barely a glance in summer, when "Cattle Call Roundup" concentrated heavily on country news — the Bartleys marrying the Grubers, the Morivics marrying the Krebs, which is what they all did in hot weather. Generally, country folk didn't care what happened in Hebb, either. But that Saturday, eager readers everywhere across the badlands turned to the feature article, "Rib Fête Great Success," since word of the disaster had spread through southeastern Montana like a range fire.

As was the custom in society, Winn had written her column far ahead of time, with the guest list, her recipes for croutons and honey-garlic rib sauce, her discussion of California hostesswear, and the conclusion that "a fine time was had by all." Pictures by staff photographers showed several views of the smoldering ruins with the hostess carried out on a stretcher by police. Readers recognized their own Senator Struthers sprayed with a garden hose by an unidentified guest. The highlight, everyone agreed, was the unposed personality shot of Mr. and Mrs. Niles Hardesty chasing each other over the miniature golf course, with black bars pasted over some

parts. The *Hebb World* prided itself as a family newspaper.

Sheep couldn't decide if such thorough media exposure was good for his campaign image or not. Your name in the paper meant free publicity, grist for the mill. And yet, there might have been better ways to introduce himself to the public eye as a man pressing the law-and-order issue. He considered bringing charges against Niles to make his position clear, but Winn wouldn't hear of it, and Flo had generously sent a bread-and-butter note to apologize for the breakage. Besides, what were old friends for, if not to forgive and forget?

"I've been thinking," he said in the breakfast nook some days after Winn's release from Shock Ward. "I'm going to run for mayor."

"Oh God, you've got to be kidding."

"Don't you think I could win?"

"Win what? A chance to get your picture in the paper again?"

"There's a salary. We'll have to replace all that patio furniture."

"I don't want any more patio furniture. I don't want any more publicity. I want peace."

Valium withdrawal was a sad thing to see, Sheep reflected. Ever since hospitalization, she had wandered the house in droopy housecoats and mules, less like the fashion plate he had married than some character in Edgar Allan Poe. She didn't keep herself up. Without makeup, her face was a wad of lines, her copper hair showed the mouse roots. She drank Kahlua, ate tortilla chips, and stared out at the men removing charred timbers from the gutted storehouse. (How had that fire started? Was Niles smoking in bed, or what?) Soon, Sheep figured, his wife

would cross the line from social drinking into alcoholism, a thin line always hard to gauge in southeastern Montana. And yet, politicians' wives were famous for drinking too much: it was a Republican tradition, with the Democrats gaining fast. People always forgave alcoholic women, knowing the pressures their husbands were under. Across the toaster he took Winn's shaky hand and squeezed it.

"Nobody blames you, sweetheart. The whole world knows you were too bombed and drugged to lead Niles on."

"Oh God, Sheep, I don't want to talk about it."

"You still mad at me for the turning fork? I was in a bad mood, I told you that."

Pop-Tarts sprouted brightly from the toaster and Winn removed her hand to butter them. "Loreen," she called, "would you please bring in the coffee and Kahlua?"

There was a crash in the kitchen. Then, as if taking the speed-trials at Indianapolis, Loreen wheeled the breakfast cart around the back bar and down the breakfast nook stairs, stopping inches from the table. Sheep's stomach lurched at the casserole of Quaker Oats with brown sugar and butter, toast diamonds with poached eggs staring up, grids of hashbrowns, and lime Jell-O salad.

"We tend to eat light in the summer, Loreen," he said. "There's enough here for the Russian army."

"Don't pick at her, Sheep. After all, she saved our lives."

"I guess so. Why don't you try some Quaker Oats yourself?"

"No, just the coffee and liqueur, thank you. I might have a frozen taco for lunch."

"I wouldn't mind your Mexican food, if Loreen here would ever unthaw the damned stuff."

"Now don't be a pig. You know how hard she tries."

He knew it in spades, for hadn't Loreen been underfoot every minute since his release from jail? Her first self-appointed task had been to clean the house from top to bottom, which was why the fiber glass curtains looked so crinkly after their hot wash in the dishwasher and why all the fry pans shone like mirrors. Loreen, with heroic effort, had scrubbed away every speck of Teflon.

Now she was serving the poached eggs, and although the nook was hot and his tongue furry and green from a hangover, he thanked her kindly. She was so anxious and solemn, it would take Simon Legree to say no. He would have to say no some day, though. Wasting all this food was hell on the budget. Purvis Mining and Smelting had written the day before, stating that his seams in the fossil beds were too low grade to bother with, given transportation costs. Wait, the letter had said. Any day now, the nation might get a clear energy policy.

"We need money, Winn." He told her what the mayor of Hebb pulled in, and with an unpainted fingernail, she picked a Pop-Tart seed from between her teeth. "Besides, there's lots I could do for this town."

"Jell-O salad?"

"No thanks, Loreen, all the same. Winn, you have to think of the violence that's been going around. All on account of that whorehouse, the way I see it. Think of that poor Velva Rose Compass and her tragic end. As the old, traditional name in Hebb, the Triumphs ought to be concerned."

"So that's it. I knew it would be Marlyss."

"Quaker Oats?"

"Not now, Loreen. Dammit, Winn, I'm talking about law and order."

"You're talking about the only woman you ever loved." As from the tomb, Winn rose up from the knotty pine bench, taking the Kahlua bottle with her. "I'm going to indulge in a little nap, now. It was a lovely breakfast, dear, but I just don't have any appetite."

"You sit right back down," Sheep commanded, pounding the table. "I need you in this campaign, as an asset. That was the deal, remember? On the honeymoon, when we found we couldn't —"

"We're not alone, Sheep."

She was right. A round, shiny face watched him, fascinated. Winn turned on the carpeted stair, her eyes fairly breaking his heart with their sadness and contempt.

"Oh God, Sheep, can't you ever forget her?" she said huskily. "It's been more than twenty years, after all."

2

It had been a mixed marriage, Catholic and Scandinavian, and most folks around Hebb figured that this was more than enough to decide Sheep Triumph's mother on death. Of course, Mary Margaret Triumph had suffered her pains for years, but Doc Frye had always held that she was way too respectable a lady to undergo the full examination and had waived the Seven Danger Signals. However, when Sheep blurted out his intentions toward Marlyss Maki, a Home Ec teacher of Lutheran blood, Mama had made a beeline to All Souls' Hospital and

permitted everything. By sundown, all Shale County knew that it was as big as a grapefruit and not nearly so benign. Mama had come home for her overnight kit and then moved right on in to Terminal for doses of chemicals and Extreme Unction. Naturally, the wedding had to be postponed.

Sheep took Marlyss to visiting hours twice a week until she began her excuses. "It's the room," she told him, and even Sheep could see the point. Mama shared the room with a country woman hooked to a life-support machine, and the window had been sealed shut to keep out air. Although Mama dollied things up with her living color crucifix and oil-on-velvets of Golgotha, the room was heavy with the usual hospital smell of gravy and fevers, and the life-support bubbled like Noma lights. Sheep told his mother that Marlyss was very busy teaching, but Mama never seemed to get the point.

"My, I so wish your little Finn would come see me," she said, often. "She's such a sight for sore eyes, so pale and blonde and spindly butted."

"Now, Mama. You get your rest."

"Funny how you big dark men always go for these whey-faced Dresden dolls, but then, the flesh is grass." She would smile at him then, her iron-gray perm a halo against the hospital percale. "Might as well go ahead and get it over with, Francis. I'll have to miss the ceremony no matter what."

"You never looked better."

"My, but I'd so like to be a fly on the wall when your little Finn bride comes down the aisle, or the courtroom, or wherever these here Protestants do it. Wearing white, if that's what she chooses to wear."

"White, Mama. Synthetic lace. Made it herself."

"Got it all ready, does she? Well, can't blame these poor spinster schoolmarms for bucking in the chute once they've got hold of a live one."

Then she would reel in her rosary, pure rock crystal blessed by the Pope, and start the evening's run at her favorite, the Sorrowful Mysteries. He had not been lying: she had never looked better. Somehow the terrible disease melted away the years, bringing out the martyred Irish eyes, the clench of jaw, the firm expanse of cheek. He saw now why she had been compared to Jeanette MacDonald in convent school, although she had never cared much for classical music, beyond Gregorian chant and Saber Dance.

The woman kept alive by life-support went into a fatal decline after Mama's arrival, and soon the room became a private. Mama started a crewel work of the Agony in the Garden; friends brought divinity and gossip; her bridge club met in Terminal one Wednesday a month. It was a wonder how Mrs. Triumph held on. St. Anne's Society whispered of miracles, of Lazarus returned, and Doc Frye confided to Sheep that his mother might just make history in the medical books. Pleased as he was by this recovery, Sheep nonetheless was getting that raccoon look around the eyes which comes so often to those with lingering loved ones.

"I swear, you look like a tub of used Crisco," joshed his mother in one of her sprightlier moods. "What's that little Finn been feeding you, anyways? Potatoes and black bread, that's all the diet I ever heard of among the Finns."

"Mama, she's got a B.S. in Home Economics from Bozeman and she knows nutrition. She's a smart, good-looking woman. She'll be an asset."

"It's all B.S. to me, if you get my meaning. No nutri-

tion for me, it was the School of Life for yours truly here. Never had no advantages like our little Harlyss."

"Marlyss, Mama. You know her name as well as I do."

"God-awful names these Lutherans get, but then they make them up out of air. I named you after a saint."

"I know," said Francis, who hated his name.

"St. Francis spoke to the birds. He bled from his hands."

Any day now, Sheep thought, staring at his own.

"Must be some nice Catholic girls around, son. Can't all be Finn whores."

He stood up at the sound of the visitors' bell.

"Can't wait, can you?" she said, spearing him with her Naughty Marietta smile. "Just a-chomping at the bit."

After the proposal, Marlyss had quit teaching, but as time dragged by, she took it up again, getting to be such a bitch in class that half her girls gave up on the Domestic Sciences altogether and switched over to Secretarial instead. At thirty-one, she was already over the hill, and an unmarried blonde is a standing reproach to any town. Everybody agreed she was a beauty, but there wasn't much future in her shy, standoffish ways, not to mention the B.S., the kiss of death to marriage hopes in Montana, where men don't like a woman to know. Finally Marlyss broke down and took Catholic Instruction from Father Fahey at Martyred Side. Thinking this might oil the wheels, they both went to visiting hours to break the good news to Mama.

"Now ain't that the sweetest gesture?" Mama said, dabbing puffs of powder from her compact; she always held that looking good to the bitter end was a woman's Cross. "Surprised you never thought of it before, Marlyss, honey. Seems to me any real wife would want to know her husband's true beliefs."

"Dammit, Mama, I lapsed ten years ago," Sheep protested.

"No such thing as a lapse, once the Faith's got its stranglehold, and I raised you Catholic. It's your fair-weather converts that slide away."

Marlyss never did go through with Instructions after that, and Sheep didn't have the heart to push it. He kept busy, branching from life insurance into real estate, the coming thing. Their dates were beginning to get tense. Since they were getting married, he and Marlyss had agreed to stick pretty much to Above the Waist — naturally this was a long time ago, before Below the Waist got to be so commonplace across southeastern Montana. Then, on a stormy Good Friday eve, the tragedy hit. Called to the hospital too soon, Sheep stood for hours in the orange glow of the night-lite, torn between hope and fear. At last, Mama's eyes blinked open. They beaded bright as she drew him near and pressed into his hand her own wedding ring, a full two carats of genuine diamond, beveled sharp and set in the Crown of Thorns motif.

"Your daddy got it in the dog-food boom, just before his cirrhosis," she whispered in the rough, abstracted way of the dying. "I want you to have it."

"For Marlyss, Mama?" Sheep asked, touched.

"Don't speak that Finn whore's name to me. This here is for you to cash in and start over, when she leaves you holding the bag."

"Jesus, Mama, you're on your deathbed. How's about a final blessing?"

"Bull shit."

These were her final words. When the night nurse came in with a big "howdy" and her tray of needles and pee,

she found Sheep deep in thought, his mother's gaze fixed on the ceiling, and the sky shuddering with thunder as it received Mary Margaret Triumph's righteous soul. To allow time for burial and nine weeks' grades, the couple waited until July for the ceremony, tying the knot at last in City Hall, the day Shale County was declared a Drought Disaster Area for the second year running, a kind of record. The bride dazzled everyone in her synthetic lace with a seed-pearl bodice, but the groom, in double-duty funeral black, looked more like something the cat dragged in. The *Hebb World* covered their brunch reception at the newly renovated Sacajawea Motor Inn with front-page pictures and the headline: MARLYSS MAKI WEDS!!!

For the honeymoon, they drove all the way across the state to Glacier National Park, but it was cold in the park that year, with an ice fog hanging over the Going to the Sun Highway and the light no good for color slides. Their Great Northern hotel was clammy, staff and guests huddled around a lobby fireplace big enough to roast an ox, although the room, below zero as it was, looked out on a lovely panorama of snowcapped Rockies, frozen lakes, and the many tongues of an advancing glacier. In bed, shivering under the Hudson Bay blanket, a funny thing happened to Sheep. Marlyss's sauna scent and the slope of her pelvis drove him half to frenzy, but although he got it up and kept it up, he found no release with her.

Next day brought a dry run, too, and he couldn't puzzle it out. If anything, too quick on the trigger had been his usual tragic flaw, ever since the days of Judi Jo Platz in the loges of the Chief Theater, with Gene Autry back in the saddle again and the smell of Beich's bananas ripe in the darkness. In those days, he had said the Apostles'

Creed over and over for control — often getting no further than "crucified, died and was buried," with Judi Jo a flag-twirler, known for her high-pussy backbends. Naturally, with age and maturity, he could usually make it to the "Amen," but with Marlyss, so long awaited, it seemed there was room for the entire Stations of the Cross, and to spare.

"You do go on and on," she said that night, easing him away.

"Too much for you, hon?"

"Don't hear me complaining, do you? But Sheep, I think we should talk."

"How's about a drink, instead?" he nudged, for these were the times when it was considered sissy for men to communicate. Getting out of the chill bed, Marlyss pressed him athwart, and he doubled up from the shock of pain that hit the underneath doodad, the thing that connected. Without a word, he hurried across the tundra of knotty pine floor to the bathroom and tried to limber it up a shade with her royal jelly. It glared back up at him, stretched and painful, an angry slit eye. The next day as he awoke blue-balled to the bracing day, he found Marlyss already dressed in a beige travel ensemble, one of many from her huge hope chest. "We can't screw all the time," she said, and he had to admit she was a beauty, with the ice-green, slanty Finnish eyes and the straight birch fall of hair. He didn't get up right away, though. Under the striped blanket was sore petrifaction: getting dressed turned into an engineering feat, zipping up a penance.

Considered from a strictly educational point of view, Glacier Park was interesting enough, with lots of geology piled deep under the snow and lots of alpine vistas. Yet Sheep couldn't concentrate on the scenic tours, walking

in a gorilla crouch and pulling down his jacket flaps: below, it had taken on a life of its own and waxed and waned at will. On the third day, as it rose from the dead in the airy cavern of the dining hall, their singing waiter gave out with "If I Had a Hammer" and dropped a plate of hard rolls in his lap. Sheep's yelp, though it startled the other diners, did not seem to perturb Marlyss.

"Let's go to another park," she said, blowing her fingers so they wouldn't freeze to the silverware. "I'm getting tired of natural splendor."

Yellowstone was warmer, though hysterical with kids and bears, and Old Faithful gushing gloriously up on cue put Sheep into a blue funk. There were no rooms at the inn, so they parked in a campground, Sheep having no luck again, as wild things snuffled round the car and a line of Jamboree Boy Scouts marched perpetually by on their way to the privy. They drove next to the Custer Battlefield, although both had seen the sad ridge a million times before and had no real taste for important cemeteries. That night, in the motel at Hardin, as Sheep revved up for another grim try, Marlyss announced that her womb had dropped and she could no longer love.

"It dropped?" he asked, stunned.

"They do."

"Just . . . thunk?"

"Not used to all the exercise, I guess."

"You better see a doctor."

"Oh, it'll perk up when it's ready. We'll just have to wait for the hand of God."

Sheep didn't know what to say. Like many American men, he was vague on the theory of the female, and like all Catholic men, he didn't want it spelled out, ever. At

first he worried that she might be defective, a car with worn shocks; then he grew smug in the idea that he'd worn her out with his insatiable needs. Actually, up until then, he hadn't given much thought to Marlyss's point of view, figuring that as long as it was up, she was getting satisfaction. At least, underneath him, she groaned a lot.

Nonetheless, back in Hebb, he weaseled the key to the Adult Closet of the Carnegie Public Library and found, among the rest of the smut — *Ulysses, Forever Amber, Catcher in the Rye, The Kinsey Report, Brave New World* — several marriage manuals the librarians had ordered by mistake, believing them to be nurse novels. They were mostly about curing the frigid woman with shooting stars, but in *These Eternal Bonds of Love*, he found a chapter called "The Male Refusal." Impotence was the most popular, he discovered, but that didn't apply, and neither did the diagnosis of Refusal as Revenge on Women, Inspired by Hatred of the Mother. He had never seen such baloney written down in black and white. As for revenge, he had always been a popular buck with the ladies, and as for Mama, he was the sure-fire favorite of all her sons, even before the others had left home. Many people had pointed out how much they were alike in looks and character.

The book gave no cure for Refusal, beyond a few perverted acts that might pass muster in New York City, but got you ten years to hanging in southeastern Montana. Besides, he could never ask Marlyss to do anything like that, and her an ex-schoolteacher. The last advice *These Eternal Bonds of Love* offered was to consult Professional Help, Physician, or Spiritual Advisor. Sheep put the book back and turned off the naked overhanging bulb. As far as he knew, there was no Professional Help in the whole

state, despite the pressing need, and as for talking sex with Doc Frye, might as well broadcast it on the radio. Father Fahey came from Ireland.

Summer passed quietly. The honeymoon over, Sheep could walk tall again, and spent most days at his real estate office, the former Crawls' Taxidermy, with the stuffed wildcats in the window and the fresh borax smell. Marlyss seemed happy enough, redecorating Mama's old house in Danish Modern, painting everything white and opening the windows. There was always a surprise when he got home. Mama's comfy old chairs, for instance, replaced by contraptions of canvas and tube. The old elkhead hatstand gone. A multicourse meal with all the trimmings, a tribute to Home Ec with its nutrition and eye appeal and no taste. Then, one smoky, golden September day, the biggest surprise of all. Marlyss announced she was pregnant.

"You can't be," he said.

"Why not? I've missed two months."

"You just can't."

"Take a look," she beamed, and sure enough, he thought he saw a gentle swelling.

"What about your dropped womb?"

"Oh, that. Guess it perked up."

"Guess it did. And here I thought you were redecorating the house."

"What's that supposed to mean? Sheep, why do you look so strange? Aren't you pleased?"

He didn't accuse her openly, but he was thinking, how right Mama had been about the Finns! That evening they had their first knock-down-drag-out fight about the way she seasoned hamburger with oregano and left the tooth-

paste cap in the sink. Through October and November, the neighbors, retired widows and divorcees mostly, stood lynx-eyed by their windows as shouts of "whore" and the sound of breaking starter-sets rent the sweet fall air. Oh dear, they thought, rushing to the phone. It was always so sad when a newly-wed couple hit that rough patch of marriage after the first flood of passion got spent.

On December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Marlyss went early into Billings. Sheep came home to find her sitting on the floor in the bleak Danish living room, the windows and blinds shut. In the dim light, her face shone wet.

"I'm a fool," she said, after a long time. Unhappy with Doc Frye's prenatal care, she had checked with a real doctor in Billings; it was a phantom pregnancy, a child of air.

"I knew it," he said, relieved.

"How so?"

He was about to explain about Glacier and the Male Refusal, but then figured she'd had enough bad news for one day and it was always best to let sleeping dogs lie. Instead, he pulled up the blinds, and the remains of a winter sunset, dismal and ashy, seeped into the room. He smiled, meaning to comfort, but she took it wrong.

"You can laugh if you want to. I couldn't be more humiliated."

"Now, hon."

"Well, I hope you're satisfied. It wasn't yours, it wasn't anybody's. It didn't even exist."

"Then there's nothing to get fussed about."

"Don't you mock me, Sheep," she whipped out, suddenly up and slapping his face. She ran to the guest room,

Mama's old study, the one with the bolt on the inside. He almost followed, but then decided she'd had a shock and needed time to come to her senses.

Some weeks later, the day before Christmas, at high noon, with the mercury shrunk to a plip and the sky salting down snow, Marlyss opened the front door of the house. She posed on the stoop for all the neighbors to see, in a red sheath gown slit to the cleavage, gold tree-ornament balls at her ears, and makeup laid on with a trowel. She adjusted black stockings, showing thigh. Then, on naked spike heels, she marched down the unshoveled walk and through the drifts toward Main Street.

At Treasure State Tractor and Appliance, where many were buying last-minute gifts, onlookers fairly dropped their teeth. At Tumbleweed Gas 'n' Eats, Earl Trowels put on his wolverine parka and mushed on out to offer a cup of coffee, but she paid him no heed. Bust high, she strode past Wilma's Modes, Griswold's Dental Rooms, the Cowman's Bar, the Sheepman's Bar, the Owl Bar, Billy's Lounge, and Bernie's Beer and Bide-a-Wee. Police got called when she passed the Last Stand Hotel, for beyond lay nothing but the Big Sky Country Beauty School and the Northwestern Conservatory of Accordion and Dance. Beyond that, nothing at all.

Folks placed bets. Disillusioned with marriage after all those years without, she meant to die in the snow like a senior Eskimo. She had tried a Beauty Treatment at home, and was taking it back to the Big Sky Country for a refund. She had a part in the Northwestern Conservatory's holiday production, *Why the Chimes Rang*. The most popular, six to five odds, was that she had gone berserk from too much thinking and reading, and meant to fling herself into the Tongue River — froze to an iron thread

that time of year — from intellectual despair. None hit the mark. A squad of cars followed Marlyss now, and phones rang off their hooks throughout the town when she made her right turn at the Auto Grave. For once that road got taken, there could be but one goal.

The whorehouse had begun life in Montana's golden age, after the defeat of General Custer, when the cavalry stormed out to the territory to make things safe for whites. The main building still stood, its historical brick floated up the Missouri River by paddlewheel, its French windows carted by mule from Saint Louis, its gingerbread veranda carved by German cuckoo-clock specialists in Saint Paul. Once the interior had been decked out in the best Early Manifest Destiny, with the rugs of suppressed tribes, the skins of threatened animals, leather-studded sofas, and love seats meant for the behinds of a more expansive age. Times, however, had changed.

At the century's turn, the first madame, Opal Hebb, had deeded the place to the Catholic Church in exchange for Purgatory, and after her death, nuns from the order of His Precious Blood had traveled from Peoria to set up an academy where decent girls could learn watercolor, *Für Elise,* and the Parts of the Mass. But decent girls shied away from the whorehouse and the nuns shivered alone during the dread winter of aught-six under buffalo robes loaned by the Indians. Mass stigmata broke out like hives, not to mention speaking in tongues and detailed visions of Christ's naked passion in the ceiling mirrors. Around 1926, the Bishop of Chicago ordered the whole lot of them back to Illinois for a general overhaul, although many perished in the floods out of Fargo, due to mass derailment.

From then on, it was downhill all the way. During the

Depression, the house had stood empty, French windows warping purple in the sun, the veranda sagging. High school kids stopped by to drink and explore; tramps slept under the cobwebbed bar and warmed Sterno in the fireplace of native quartz. After the war, Ava Trueblood nested there, doing a hole-in-corner business with returning veterans, and by the time of Marlyss's march, it was considered Ava's Place, with beer, dancing, and a few old bags at the ready for those too unsanitary or too listless to pick up schoolgirls downtown.

Standing calf-deep on the historic veranda, a crowd of onlookers at her back, Marlyss knocked until her fingers throbbed. Then she realized it was a public place and the door was unlocked. She walked into a brown darkness smelling of sour beer and Evening in Paris. A faraway jukebox played "Getting Sentimental Over You." A dog barked. As her eyelids thawed and pulled apart, she noticed gleams from overhead mirrors and a long carved bar like a Viking ship. She went past the bar, blowing warmth into her palms, and pushed into the kitchen. There, a huge woman in a marabou shruggie soaked her feet in a zinc tub, reading *One Hundred Best Hairdos for Home and Office.*

"Sorry, honey," she said, giving Marlyss a sizing up with pouched eyes. "We're closed for the festive season."

"Isn't that the best time?"

"Look, baby-doll, you're class-A stuff, but we ain't hiring."

Marlyss looked in despair at the greasy floors, the scarred tin pans, the dyed marabou monster before her. Then she remembered her invented child, her husband. Again, she calculated the money in their joint Savings Account, the cashed-in Teachers' Retirement Fund. No

matter what they said, a B.S. in Domestic Science prepared you for reality.

"I didn't come to sell," she informed the woman. "I came to buy."

*

"And she did, too, the bitch," Sheep told Loreen in the breakfast nook. Her serious round glasses never left his face. "Found out the Catholic Church still owned the deed, and she bought it from under Ava Trueblood's ass. For a song, the way I hear it. Oh, Mama was right about that Finn."

At least she hadn't got her paws on the diamond ring; no, Mama's gift still sparkled hard and sharp in the safety deposit box, something to fall back on. Yet what of his dignity and self-respect? Bad news travels fast in a small town, and folks started sniggering at him right away on the streets. No one ever said so straight out, but he knew how the men must discount him for keeping such slack control, how the women discussed what kind of lover he must be to have her rush off to service half the countryside. He understood for the first time why husbands feel so queasy and wronged when their wives start to combine marriage with a career.

When the Triumph Place opened up, he thought of confronting Marlyss as a customer and withering her with scorn, but he held his fire. He reckoned she'd be back soon enough, crawling on her hands and knees. Running a business was a lot harder than teaching a mess of teenage girls how to sew in shoulder pads. Then the rumors flew. He heard that she'd gone on a buying trip to the Dakotas for new girls. She was investing in fresh sheets and guest towels. The Grand Opening offered doubles to

the first ten customers. Everybody agreed that she ran a tight ship. No price-gouging and no tips. A blackboard over the bar spelled out the costs for frills and extras, a list that folks said was a sex education in itself. Marlyss herded the girls to All Souls' Hospital for monthly clap checkups so a person's pecker wouldn't drop off the minute after. That spring, she bought band and operetta tickets from the high school in blocks, to support the local arts. Regular as clockwork, she paid the cops 10 percent of the monthly gross for their Orphans' Benefit, setting many a young life straight through charity. It was clear that Marlyss Triumph meant to make a name for herself, and that name was his.

At the time Marlyss opened the Triumph Place, Hebb was in a period of bust, though the rest of the nation boomed faraway around it. In early times, tourists bored to distraction on the long pull from the Black Hills to Yellowstone had been bottlenecked into Main Street with no choice but to spend money at Sitting Bull Souvenir and Agate Café. Given the new interstate bypass, the town counted itself lucky to lure the odd family looking for a gas station to pee in. Once a railroad center, hub of southeastern Montana, Hebb had seen the Route of the Hiawatha become the Last of the Mohicans. Even the Northern Pacific didn't want to stop anymore, the trains barreling right on past the old terminal, now the Pow-Wow Senior Lodge, where ex-conductors with timetables printed in their blood, rose up from bedpans and cried aloud.

At the Hebb International Airport, stock car racing had long since taken over the deserted asphalt runways. Even Frontier wasn't interested. Stockmen went to Miles City for the auction; Glendive had the oil; Locate had the

rodeo. Young marrieds, always the first rats to desert a sinking ship, had moved in droves to more glamorous Billings and Belle Fourche, so that every other person you saw on Main was blue-rinsed or crouched from arthritis. With no industrial base, the Jay Cees had plunged hip deep into tourist attractions, the last gasp of the ghost town. In their brochure, "Off the Beaten Path," they offered the Badlands Museum, built from an abandoned Shell station and boasting a prime collection of antique sewing machines, wagon yokes, and a petrified doughnut. The museum was slow to catch on, though, and there was loose talk of a Historic Trail through the fossil beds, with cement lizards and history on plaques; but with the national concern for paleontology at low ebb, many felt this to be the impossible dream.

Then came the Triumph Place. Tourism picked up smartly. Airplanes, many of them private from as far away as Calgary and Chicago, dropped down among the stock cars at the airport. The Northern Pacific scheduled stops in Hebb, since so many passengers seemed to want a layover. Florists, dress shops, leather workers, and many another local craftsman got a new lease on life, and Sheep's real estate investments tripled in value as the young marrieds swarmed back to town, disillusioned with the urban tempo. He realized that Marlyss was making him rich through the domino effect, and hated her all the harder. Mama's house seemed haunted by her blonde, vengeful ghost, so he moved into his office, drinking too much and watching the first gray stirrings of Montana television. He ate Franco-American cold from the can. He experienced the sadness, none greater, of going to the supermarket just to be with people. He became all too familiar with the abyss of dread that yawns when a per-

son peels back the foil of a TV dinner and sees, yet once again, the triangle of bright peas, the wafer slices in glue, the square of ten-score butter melting over mashed yam.

After three solid years with no encouraging word from his bride, Sheep filed for divorce, if only to catch her attention. In the Hebb Government Center one sweaty, airless morning with half the town looking on, he demanded freedom. As a token gesture to the law, Judge Beavers inquired about his legal grounds, as if everybody didn't know Marlyss had enough adultery to her credit to fuel inner-city Reno. Sheep hadn't bothered with actual proof, so the judge granted divorce on general principles, as the audience applauded. Staunch in his ordeal, Sheep kept his eyes fixed on the back doors, thinking that any minute now she would barrel on through for a showdown. But she didn't appear, or send a lawyer, or ask for alimony, or demonstrate in any way that she still loved him. Technically, of course, prostitutes were not allowed downtown in daylight, to protect public morals.

"Not one phone call. Not a word," he told Loreen. "Don't believe what they say about whores with hearts of gold. There's nothing in there but millstones, slate granite."

Sympathy shone from her large spaniel eyes, and Sheep wondered how much he had actually let slip. Mainly thinking out loud, he had not meant to go on so long about his private life in front of a servant. Hell, it didn't make a whit of difference: everybody else knew about Marlyss anyway, and it was always hard to guess how much an Indian could comprehend of white customs. It was damned unnerving the way she stared. Hadn't the Mission ever heard of contact lenses?

"Here I've been talking your ear off, Loreen, and you

with so much work to do," he harrumphed. "Best you forget my problems and tend to your own. Madame Marlyss is past history to me, blood under the bridge."

"Oh, yessir!" she said, promptly and eagerly, but for some reason he couldn't put his finger on, he was not reassured.

3

Left alone, Loreen fed the Garb-all with poached eggs and oatmeal. Her plan was not working. Every day she tried hard to feed the hungry, piling on more recipes as a Beatitude, but the Triumphs didn't have the appetite of a fly. She had tried healing the sick, too, but then the doctor made Mrs. Triumph throw away all her pink pills, and as far as Loreen knew, there were no points in Purgatory for bartending to the thirsty. Clearly God was punishing her for her spiritual pride in asking Him to destroy Hebb. She realized that the good miracles were left for senior-type saints who had worked their way up from square one, but what could she do to start out? She had cleaned the house a million times already.

Looking around the spotless kitchen, her eye caught the blender, the toaster, and the electric wok. For some reason, Mrs. Triumph never put them in the dishwasher with the other things. Probably they needed hand washing, like delicate fabrics and woolens. Quickly she filled the sink with lukewarm water and threw all of the dainty

appliances in, scrubbing their movable parts and coils with a vegetable brush, very carefully. Then, despite the hot day, she dried them for a few minutes in the oven, and plugged in the blender as a test case. But it was just her luck, the generator went on the blink by coincidence. Oh, if only God would take His eyes off the sparrows as they keeled over and died, and let her heal the Triumphs' electricity! That would be a Beatitude to write home about.

She walked out into the glaring day and, heedless of sunstroke, made her way through the dusty cheatgrass to the big green metal box with the danger sign. She said Hail Marys for a long time. Let me heal this box, she whispered, and was about to lay her hand on its buzzing surface when she realized that here she went again with another deadly mother of pride. God didn't hand out the high-class miracles to just anybody. No, it was the small unseen Corporate Works of Mercy she needed now, but how to begin? The house was clean: she had even scrubbed the furniture with Brillo. The lawn and garden needed work, but Mr. Triumph had thoughtfully locked up his tools so she wouldn't injure herself. How wrong first impressions were! At first she had considered him cold and standoffish, and this very morning he had sat in the nook as in Confession, telling all.

She left the generator and passed the fowl pond where the swans foamed and the chickens dragged their butts in the dust. It would be nice to do a Corporate Work for Mr. Triumph. Here she had been pinning her hopes on household chores, which didn't require a saint, not really, only a wife. And yet, Mr. Triumph's need was more grievious than any she knew, shafted as he was by the evil scarlet woman and none of it his fault. To think,

she'd walked downtown in a red dress without a coat in the middle of winter! Like to catch her death. It was a job beyond the electric wok and the toaster, but what could one such as she, a mite and earwig, do against the beast of the Whore of Babylon?

In a brown study, Loreen passed along the rubble of the storehouse, walked over the scorched flagstones, and moved out past the rotisserie, where a few charred bones from the barbecue still rested in the ash like the remains of infant martyrs. Out on the open desert of the golf course, she kicked green shreds of the plastic hose with her moccasin toe, trying to remember the Benziger Brothers for a clue. There was them as mourned, and them as got persecuted, and the meek, and the pure in heart that got to see God, but she had plumbed the depth of every cranny of those Beatitudes and still didn't have enough gold stars to heal a generator. And the peacemakers. It was one Beatitude she had passed over, but now, the more she thought of it, the more it seemed a bright avenue opening out, all ready and waiting for her to run down with open heart and arms.

The peacemakers. She looked to heaven for a sign, and saw that the sky was silvery as the Chalice, with the sun a bright Monstrance, and a few clouds floating like Hosts upon the drowsy air. Behind her the swans rested as on a mirror, two multiplied into four, like the loaves and fishes. There was a shine to all things, and she felt as if the Lord Himself walked with her and talked with her on the miniature golf course, His voice as low and rough and kindly as that of Mother Januarius herself, reminding her that them as meddled and interfered were to be called the children of God, and that those she persecuted would rise up to call her blessed.

She would go unto this woman of sin, and flushed with the power of the Lord, show her the evils of selling it. After all, St. Mary Magdalene had been but a hooker herself, until she got to wash Jesus' feet with her hair dunked in oil, proving for the ages that Heaven's mercy could make a person do anything. Madame Marlyss would see the light and close down the whorehouse, and Hebb could sink back to its vows of poverty. Mr. Triumph wouldn't have to run for mayor anymore, with the violence all gone, and Mrs. Triumph would rain kisses and eat some oatmeal and fill out her figure. Oh yes! Loreen cried silently to the sky. It was such a joy helping others, once God had broke down and showed you the straight and narrow way to get right in there and bring His truth to them who had never felt the need of it in the first place!

4

Each August, the Hebb Ghost Riders, a service group of professional people with palominos, gave their Flapjack Breakfast in City Park to raise funds for corral fees and muscular dystrophy. This was the moment that Sheep had pinpointed to fling his hat into the ring, and he was addressing the crowd from atop the chuckwagon buffet as they tried to cut their buckwheat cakes with plastic forks. The loudspeaker system was out of sync, so his speech emerged as mostly gargle and echo, but folks paid

as much heed as could be expected on a hot, closed-in morning, with the cottonwoods hanging dusty overhead and babies screeching out from sour diapers. Most eyes watched Winn instead, slumped in a chair at the back of the platform, wondering how any man would let himself get stabbed in the rear for such a one as that. Other eyes were peeled on the kids trying to push each other off the bronzed tank, a relic of World War II. Everybody pretended not to notice the black Cutlass at the fringe, with the scarred man, big as Frankenstein, at the wheel, and the blonde slanty-eyed woman in the back. It was considered only polite in Hebb not to look their gift horse in the mouth.

"Can't make out a word he says, Madame Marlyss. You sure he means to close us down?"

"Why else would Sheep Triumph go into politics?"

"To serve the people?"

"How little you know him."

She lit another Virginia Slim, her only vice. She should have known better than to wear a foundation with the navy faille suit on such a sauna-bath of a day. But she had to look respectable in town, and what if Sheep should see her with no support? A slack poop and Cooper's droop were expected after a certain age, but she wouldn't want her ex-husband to get a coronary from the shock. It had been a long time.

"He's no spring chicken hisself," said Arnold, divining her thoughts, as usual. "His face reminds me of somebody. You ever see Nelson Eddy in *Naughty Marietta* on the late show?"

Well, naturally Sheep had changed. The years had sloped the shoulders and the manly chest was mostly sucked-up beer belly, but she observed that he still stood

in that same self-contained, mean, outraged way. Stance meant more to some women than biceps.

"So you still love him," Arnold prodded.

"Oh, I don't know about love. We were married."

"Twenty years ago."

"Marriage doesn't have a thing to do with years. You're stuck with it forever. Like a tattoo."

With a professional's eye, she sized up the second Mrs. Triumph. Couldn't get fifty cents a trick at the Place, even at peak rush-hour. What could Sheep see in her? Was it her personality?

"She shouldn't wear them thin caftans neither," said Arnold. "Not with them bony hips. Must use Easter-egg dye to get that ketchup color in her hair. Lavender sure ain't her color. And that neck! She ain't a patch on you for looks, Madame Marlyss."

It was pleasant to hear, but the flattery of gay men was like background music, sweet on the ears, but nothing to grip the vitals. Despite her lavender caftan, Sheep had fought for Winn's honor with a turning fork, and for the first wife, not even a phone call in twenty years. Maybe she was good in bed, a wise conversationalist. Men came to bed mainly for the talk, Marlyss had found. Head aching, she stubbed out her cigarette. The car, garage-bound for months, smelled of musty crankcase. Surely that was a heat rash prickling between her breasts, and her sinuses felt like they weighed a hundred pounds. Signs of the Change, all of it. She was a fine one to talk about beauty.

"Now don't you go Finnish on me, Madame Marlyss."

"I'm not going Finnish," she said, giving him a look that communicated frozen bogs and suicide rates rising over Helsinki. "You don't have to be Finnish for ordinary middle-aged doubts and fears. I'll never see forty again.

I'll never have kids now. I run a common bawdy house, which is not your prestige career. That's my ex-husband and his red-headed wife out there, planning to close me down. I see now that my whole life is the pits made flesh. What's so specially Finnish about that?"

"Hey, come on. Let's back us another candidate, like we did Mayor Luce. Have us some fun."

"Who else is running?"

"There's 'Whoopee' Ted LeFevers, the man of the people. He plays a mean accordion at them polka rallies."

"Who else?"

"Wendall Tench, the born-again dentist."

Mild applause filtered in from the outside world and the crowd started to mill. On the platform, Sheep lifted his wife like a rag doll and gave her a big solidarity kiss.

"Drive me home, Arnold. I feel sick."

"They say Ed Gundy might run this year. He's the one that dresses up in feathers and does the Indian dances."

"Arnold!"

She sat bolt upright, spine frozen. There it was again, gazing from the midst of the crowd. The strange, sinister Buddha face. The thick glasses. The creepy smile and the odd, tangled pigtail.

"Arnold, it's her. Look!"

Arnold cased the entire park, but of course the face had disappeared. Marlyss was the only one who ever saw it, and it was driving her to the brink. At first, she had been just dimly aware of something different in the atmosphere when she ushered important clients to the veranda, a feeling that her every move was watched. One day she had spotted the face vanishing into the bushes, and now she was unwilling to set foot on the veranda without Arnold along as a guard. The first day the face

had pressed up against her office window like a near-sighted moon, she had screamed out loud.

"Christ, Arnold, who is she? Please go look for her. I'm at the end of my tether."

"What you need is a nice cold beer."

"But I swear to God, I saw her!"

"You need to get out of your girdle, that's what."

"I know I've never seen her before. I've racked my brains. If I'm going crazy, why is it taking this hideous form?"

Clucking and tsking, he drove her back to the Place, but she felt no better, since the mice had played while she was away. Couldn't trust them for a minute. It all had to do with borrowing wigs, Donna Rae throwing hairpins at Hai-Ping — their oriental from Butte, for those who were nostalgic for the U.S. involvement in southeast Asia. Coldly, Marlyss docked them work credits and sent them both to the showers. New girls expecting a chummy back-slapping madame soon learned that Madame Marlyss was as jolly as Pope Paul, for she had long ago accepted that she was the kind of woman who gets respect rather than love. She lived by rules and procedures at the Place. Drugs topped the list of forbidden things. Rolling drunks meant instant dismissal. Boyfriends and lesbian attachments were discouraged, but allowed if they didn't interfere with trade. Many of the girls supported sons and daughters in college and she attempted to help them with savings plans. Nonetheless they all called her "she-wolf," "Eva Braun," and worse behind her back, just like her teen-agers so long ago in Home Ec class. In fact, she had found no difference between running a brothel and teaching high school, except in the tax write-offs and residuals.

While her girls had lunch, she sat at the bar with Ar-

nold going over her grade-book. Donna Rae and Hai-Ping got F's for the day; if they got many more, she would have to serve a detention. It was stifling in the Grand Ballroom. The girls, ever forgetful, had left the windows opened past noon and the hot day had invaded. Her red velvet swag curtains drooped; a swarm of dust motes idled on the syrupy air. The historic parquet floor looked old and scarred, and Marlyss knew the feeling. From time to time, she glanced out the window at imagined pigtails, possible glints of light on thick glasses.

"Why do I keep seeing her, Arnold?"

"Need to relax, darling. Why not offer yourself as a House Special tonight?"

"The management never has any fun."

"What's the point of being a madame then?"

"God knows." It was, however, the story of her life. For years she had studied Home Economics in training to be wife and mother to somebody, although she had never much liked cooking or dolls as a child. The wife part had lasted seven months. The mother part had never happened. Until her marriage, not a day had passed without some thought to sexual intercourse, either in the abstract or in the particular. Now with screwing her stock-in-trade, wholesale and retail, she preferred to curl up with a good murder mystery.

"Is that Finland I see in them pretty green eyes?" asked Arnold.

"I've decided to close the Place. I've made enough money."

Frankenstein showed his teeth and gave her a hug at the waist.

"And where will you go, darling?" he said sarcastically, for she had talked this one through to its bleak Finnish

end again and again. A retirement village in Arizona, with the light switches and doorknobs near the floor, so handy when you fall from your incapacitating stroke. Or a high-rise in California, playing bridge at poolside with widows, divorcees, and other used-up broads. There, she could fly to Las Vegas with the girls to play nickel slot machines on weekends. The girls, always the girls. Even as a child, out on the Maki spread near Ladoga, she had raised her five sisters and looked after Mum, who had grown up near the Arctic Circle in the old country and got depressed in cold weather. She had gathered eggs from the hens. Even the cows had been artificially inseminated.

"Shit, guess you better roll with it," said Arnold. "Get to your room, honey, and change into a Marimekko. Pour yourself a vodka and have a good Finnish cry."

Obediently, she dragged herself into the office, once the historic boudoir of Madame Opal herself, with the original wall accouterments and the ceiling mirrors. Putting on a somber muumuu, Marlyss tried a nap, but her mask of a face kept glowering down from above. Except for a little crepe at the throat, she was a handsome woman — the phrase used for old bags who hadn't gone the total route to obesity. Even in the Change, her body stayed firm, though the mind was deteriorating apace. Had any of the rest of the family suffered the apparition of the fat brown face? All the Makis had scattered to the four winds, though, and there was nobody to ask. Despite the weary years of girls and clients, she had one lone friend, and Arnold was in a special category as bouncer, confidant, and free-lance worker for those customers who wanted a little change of pace. Someday, he would meet a nice rancher and get married, leaving her behind.

A woman should never set eyes on her ex-husband, she

decided. If the guilt didn't get you, the sense of failure would plow you into the ground. Oh fuck. Escaping self-pity, the scourge of Scandinavia, she forced herself up for a turn in the back garden. As usual, the girls had forgotten to water, and the lilac leaves were shriveled hearts, the peppermint zinnias lay like dead rats around the concrete slabs. The bottom of the birdbath looked like it had the heartbreak of psoriasis. This is what you have made, Marlyss gloomed. This is your kingdom. She sat down on the burning love seat, a ton of sunshine on her shoulders, and started taking the pins from her hair. At least gray didn't matter so much for ash-blondes, which was probably what they mean by "blondes have more fun." Cut it out, she told herself. A grasshopper twirred in the silence. Then there was a dry crush of weeds as if an animal had fallen. Marlyss felt a chill ripple of fear at her nape. She looked out past the birdbath. The face was there, watching.

"All right," Marlyss said, getting to her feet in an effort of will. "What do you want?"

She saw now that the stranger wore old-fashioned Western clothes, with ruffles and bows. Could she be in some kind of time warp, meeting a visitor from another dimension who was lost in the corridors of history? Perhaps this girl brought some important message to the modern world, but why pick on a Montana madame? Marlyss dared go as far as the birdbath. "You've been following me. Why don't you explain who you are?"

"I bring you His word," came a moan through the weeds.

"I can barely hear you."

" 'I am the Life and the Way.' "

"Please speak up," Marlyss snapped, terror making her

voice rise sharply. This was no ghost, she realized, and was therefore all the more dangerous. Perhaps some mad escapee, out to wreak vengeance on ladies of the evening. "I have my own personal bodyguard. If it's a handout you want, go to the front door. If it's a job, we don't have any positions open at the moment."

"Oh, I got me a job, out at the Triumphs'."

"Where?"

"It was Mr. Triumph told me all about you."

So, he was making contact at last, after all these years! Faint with a sudden rush of joy and panic, Marlyss grasped the edge of the birdbath and asked, "Did he send you to me?"

"I am His servant."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"Oh, His ways is a mystery."

"Fuck, you can say that again."

It was probably a trick, some kind of election ploy. Could Sheep possibly hope that she would back his campaign? It seemed unlikely, and yet there was nothing very likely at all about this peculiar girl and her old-fashioned way of talking. Marlyss studied her visitor as she lumbered through the weeds and dead zinnias to the concrete slab. Surely the girl was pregnant. Could Sheep be the father? Did he mean Marlyss to help "take care of it"? What kind of patsy did he take her for?

"Let's have the goods," she said tartly. "And be quick about it. I'm a busy woman."

"He is meek and lowly and mild."

"That's your opinion."

"He wants you to cast off sin, a spear in His purple side."

"I bet he's ashamed of having the same name as the

Place, isn't that it?" she asked with a snort of contempt. "I didn't think it had anything to do with me."

"Oh, madame, did you never give a thought to poor Agnes with her teats cut off?"

"Who?"

"Or Maria Goretti with the butcher's knife? Or Catherine, spun round on her wheel till the sparks just flew?"

At last, Marlyss caught the drift of these mysterious words. She had never heard of the girls, clearly hookers who had met perverse and violent deaths, like poor Velva Rose Compass. Could it be that Sheep was truly concerned for her safety? A hooker was prey to all kinds of crazies, but Velva Rose had been the only casualty in all her years of running the Place. Yet who could say when some psychopath would strike again? Velva had been such a sweet little thing, too, with her poodle cut and that shining overbite that made the customers feel they were in the backseats of family cars after the prom. Too unsophisticated and dumb for the weirder positions, Velva Rose had apparently been a kind of miracle in the Missionary and had attracted a steady following — among them, perhaps, her destroyer. It had all been Marlyss's fault, too. She should never have sent such a stupe as Velva Rose out on Overnight Takeout; the girl could barely find her way across the street without a road map.

From the house came shrieks as Donna Rae and Hai-Ping tore at each other again. Not for the first time, Marlyss reflected upon her girls. Without the Triumph Place, they might all be happy housewives in pincurls, feeding the kids Cup of Soup for lunch, gossiping over the back fence about "The Edge of Night." Leonda might find a job in show business, impersonating; Hai-Ping was good with

cameras; Starr could find her place in an export house, assessing furs and whips. As it was, all her girls were sitting ducks for some creep pervert with a butcher knife, and that was the message Sheep was sending her, wasn't it? Thoughtfully, Marlyss went back to the curlicued iron love seat. There was a sound of moccasins shuffling behind her.

"He really cares," she mused, sitting down gingerly. "I don't mind telling you, it's a surprise."

"Oh, yessum. His eye is on the sparrow."

"What's that? Come over here so we can have a real talk."

The girl plumped herself down on the love seat, then leapt back up with a yelp, for the iron was hot as a griddle. She's really quite special, Marlyss thought, although the Martian fix of the spectacles tended to wear on one's nerves. And so young to be pregnant. Better than being too old. When the girl had eased down into place, Marlyss put a protective arm around the frilled shoulder, thinking, it's the Change. Soon she would become one of those foolish biddies who drooled over baby carriages and collected stone eggs. Well, wasn't that better than being queen in the house of death?

"It's considerate of Sheep to want me to sell out," she told the girl. "But men never think of the little details. Like what am I supposed to do with my life? Where am I supposed to go?"

"Now don't you worry about a thing," said the girl, eager sunlight flashing from her glasses. "I got that part of it all figured out."

5

After a month on the campaign trail, Sheep felt good for nothing but the Last Roundup. It was clear to him now why politics was the ruination of America, and he couldn't figure out why so many grown men busted their asses each year to get into a profession so boring and rough. Every voter who squeezed out a handshake wanted his views on the gas shortage, nuclear leaks, and international disarmament, as if Hebb, Montana, were the lynchpin of the civilized world. At the question periods following his speeches, they actually asked questions, about the mil levy and zoning laws and mosquito spraying and a bunch of dull stuff he didn't know the first thing about. Refusing to pay his campaign staff, he spent most of his days fixing up the mistakes of his workers: the lame, the halt, and the unemployable-elsewhere. The inking on his posters, for one thing, made it look as if Hebb were getting its first black statesman, and some folks even asked if he'd ever heard of this black fellow, Francis Triumph, who was trying to introduce busing and ruin the Shale County schools.

Only the hope of getting Marlyss drove him on. The other candidates did not pose much of a threat. Ed Gundy had refused to run at all, pleading a full schedule of war dances. Investigative reporters turned up the embarrass-

ing fact that Wendall Tench was not a certified dentist, but pulled teeth only to fulfill a childhood ambition. "What does a piece of paper prove?" he asked, as the lawsuits poured in from the maloccluded. Then, at a polka rally, "Whoopee" Ted LaFevers tripped over his concertina and fell into the snare set; some said drink, others a minor stroke, but it went a long way to destroying his credibility. The Triumph campaign staff cheered at the accident, but Sheep had to wonder. What if political life turned out to be like the campaign, all Styrofoam lunches and bother? Was a husband's rightful revenge really worth it?

At least other high-profile men in the public arena returned to an evening with a decent helpmate: a beautiful folk-singer, a retired movie star, a forceful wife-and-mother backup team. He returned to a night of the living dead. Without her Valium, Winn was hypersensitive to all the nasty remarks folks made to her face about the barbecue; from being Hebb's superhostess Truman Capote she was fast turning into the town's Howard Hughes. When he pushed her out in public, she wore her ugliest purple dress and shrank away in corners as if he beat her in private with razor strops. When anybody quizzed her on Women's Issues, she simply answered "Oh God." He took to explaining her many absences as the summer flu, though he was secretly pissed off. If Winn didn't intend to be an asset, what the hell had been the use of marrying her to begin with?

After his divorce from Marlyss, he had buried himself in work, like so many of the recently liberated who find they have no life of their own. His first wife dogged his every step. If he invested in a run-down groceteria, suddenly the Triumph Place started buying provisions there. He took shares in Milt's Hardware Emporium, a sure-fire

loser, and repainting became the rage at the whorehouse, with gallons of latex ordered and every bill paid on the dot. He bought out Wilma's Modes: negligee demand from Down the Line quadrupled overnight. While bargaining with Wilma, he got to know a thin, high-strung salesgirl, a redhead with classy tastes and good family Back East. Nervous women had never appealed to him, but, for lack of better, he took Winn to Community Concerts, enduring classical music like a man, so Marlyss might hear he was not pining. One night, during a slow waltz at the newly renovated Sacajawea Motor Inn, he confided to his date an ambition to become a big man in Montana politics.

"You'll need an asset," she said, stopping dead on the dance floor. "Politicians have to curry the women's vote."

The band played "Cold, Cold Heart" through to the bitter end as Sheep mulled this over. Back at their table, after dining in silence on the New York Cut, he asked Winn to marry him.

"My, this is sudden!"

"I've weighed all the pros and cons."

"Well, Sheep, I'd have to think about it, of course." She quickly downed a stinger and began to pick at the fake gardenia on her bust. "Would you make me quit my job at Wilma's Modes?"

Sheep frowned. It was about that time when women were getting prickly about career opportunities, but he had been burned once with an independent wife, and never again.

"I'm afraid you'd have to quit."

"Oh God, I accept."

Later she invited him down to her basement apartment to see the furniture, but he didn't touch a thing. This time he was determined to do marriage the right way. As

Winn poured creme de cacao, they talked about how she would spend his money on a new house to knock the town dead. Their wedding was the social event of the season. Although Winn called herself a heathen, Sheep hired the Presbyterian Church, the largest in town, with room enough for a choir and banked flowers. For the honeymoon, no national parks, but a week's worth of the best motel on the rimrocks of Billings, with Muzak, gurgling fountains, and a desk clerk in a sissy velvet tuxedo. The expensive suite featured a water bed in the shape of a heart, orchid satin everywhere, and a magnum of California champagne in a plastic urn. On the threshold, a music box tinkled "Oh Promise Me" as sugared almonds and smarties rained over their heads. The management had even supplied joke gifts: a tiny finger-sized rubber for the groom, a Doctor Spock book and safety pins for the bride. You had to pay a fortune for real class, Sheep thought, grandly tipping the tuxedo a ten, but it was worth every penny.

They drank a toast, and then Winn took her trousseau and the bottle of champagne off to the bathroom. Sheep stripped to his shorts and turned on color TV, but it was some old musical about New Orleans with a soprano screaming out "Ah Sweet Mystery of Life" and "Italian Street Song." He tried to relax. Nothing could go wrong this time. It was a warm afternoon, no Finns, no glaciers, no pain. He checked the clock, which was busy with crawling cupids in gilt plastic. After an hour, Winn emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of lilac organza and Joy perfume, her gaunt cheeks flushed with excitement.

"I haven't had much experience," she murmured as he swept her over to the water bed, but he said that he was

tired of experienced wives, and with some difficulty, unknotted her complicated peignoir. Underneath was a satin nighty that took forever to pull over her hairdo, and beneath that, violet lace panties and a brassiere, ordered specially, she whispered, from *Vogue* magazine. The bra's hooks-and-eyes were engineering marvels in themselves, and by the time he'd managed the panties as well, he felt as twitchy as a teen-aged kid on his first try in the haystack. Getting down to target zero, he embraced her quickly, but lost control right off the bat.

"Oh God, don't worry about it, Sheep. Would you hand me the overnight kit? There's a full bottle of creme de menthe under the Clairol."

They stayed a full week, but honeymoons never had been his forte. Back at the Carnegie Public Library's Adult Closet, he discovered new marriage manuals, some with dirty diagrams, but none that offered hope. The Theory of Prematurity in Coitus turned out to be Revenge on Women, stemming from a love-hate relationship with the mother. Goddamn, he swore. Didn't these so-called sex experts ever get a new string to their bows? He and Winn kept at it for a few more months, but then they got absorbed in building the house. He figured she wasn't all that interested in the flesh anyway, though quick enough on the uptake for spending money. Frigid, no doubt. Hadn't the manuals said that cold women were the root cause of sexual despair across America?

Now that he needed his wife as an asset, she wouldn't play ball. He even arranged several speaking engagements for her, but each time she came down with summer flu and he had to go himself. One day, as he apologized to the Soroptimists' Luncheon at the Sitting Bull Souvenir and Agate Café, he noticed ladies quite unlike Soropti-

mists in the back lounge. They carried suitcases, which wasn't unusual, since the Sitting Bull was also a bus-stop. What did not fit in were the vinyl boots, the see-through tops, leopard skin, the rainbow Maybelline. After his speech and his lunch of creamed rubber, Sheep went back for a talk.

"Thought you girls weren't allowed downtown in business hours," he said pleasantly.

"Bug off, turkey," said a lovely Oriental girl, turning up her transistor. "Tell him to sit on it, Donna Rae."

"Sit on it," said Donna Rae.

"If you girls work for Madame Marlyss, there's an understood rule," he continued, a bit shaken. He had always assumed call girls were friendly. "No daylight soliciting."

"We don't work for that she-wolf no more," said a tall one draped in fun-furs. "If you want soliciting, try the streets. We're on our way to the SAC base at Great Falls, now that the Triumph Place is closed down."

A Greyhound roared up and the girls left him stunned beside a display case of turd-bird souvenirs. What kind of low trick was she pulling now? He ran for his car and broke speed records down Main, but when he reached the whorehouse, he was sure the girls had lied. The building looked the same as ever, the old French windows reflecting back the muddy Tongue, the autumn cottonwoods a gold and tobacco backdrop, the chokecherry bramble red as arteries against the veranda. But a new industrial-strength chain had been stretched across the gravel drive to bar entry. Pounding noises rent the air, and he noticed a giant cowboy nailing a cross of boards to the historic front door.

"I want the madame," he demanded.

"Sorry, bud, she just left. Might try one of those waitresses at Bernie's Beer and Bide-a-Wee."

"This is business. Real business."

"Oh, hello there, Mr. Triumph. Didn't recognize you at first." The cowboy loped down the stairs, his single earring catching the Indian-summer light. Sheep felt embarrassed, but held his ground. He had heard that Marlyss and her bouncer had been lovers these many years, and certainly the fellow was an impressive stud in those gonad-busting jeans. Well, it didn't matter. He was here for the politics, nothing personal.

"Where's your boss?" he asked sharply.

"Gone. I'm going too. Got myself a job teaching Civics and Drama at the Boys' Reformatory up in Miles City."

"Where'd she go?"

"You're not going to believe this," said the cowboy grinning broadly, and then he told Sheep Marlyss's destination.

"To join the Mission?"

"Yep."

"I don't believe it! Does she want to be a nun?"

"Nope, a Lay Sister."

"But she's not even Catholic!"

"Don't understand myself exactly how the Lay Sistering works, but she might turn Catholic to boot."

"But — what — " sputtered Sheep, "what brought it on? She was such a success as a whore."

"Beats me, Mr. Triumph. Guess there's larger forces at work in this world than you or me ever dreamt of."

6

The news that Marlyss had left whoring to go to the Mission, as a Lay Sister, was slow to reach the Hardesty ranch at Swetler. When it did, it didn't rouse much interest. Once the Hardestys and their kin got hold of a thing that caught their fancy, they hung on with a terrier grip, and the thing for that summer was, with no competition, hands down, Niles Hardesty's pronged backside.

They had welcomed Niles back from the hospital with a big chicken dinner. "How's about the thigh?" Pat had asked, digging in the fork, and Buddy had squeaked in falsetto, "Ooh, Mr. Hardesty, it's so big." Laugh, everybody thought they'd die. For his birthday they gave Niles an ashtray shaped like half a toilet, with the words, "For My Half-Assed Friends." Then the wound got infected and he had to wear a poultice on one of Flo's giant Kotex belts, with Mavourneen draining it every night as the kids stood around and watched. "That sure looks like a painful end," cracked young Kevin. "Uncle Nileth, don't you wisth you had a new asth?" lisped little Deedee, who was so cute folks thought for sure she'd grow up to be another Marie Osmond. Niles couldn't believe it. Years could go by and his relations not exchange five meaningful words. Now, with his sore butt, it was the "Grand Ole Opry Comedy Hour" every day of the week.

Only Flo refused to join in the general merriment, she who had been such a barrel of laughs. Over that summer she sat alone in the hot front room with *Better Homes* and *House Beautiful* and *Apartment Living*, eating Twinkies with beer, and radiating hate like a space heater.

"She led me on, Flo. You know how drunk I get."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"She just begged and begged. I'm a normal man, Flo."

"This subject is closed."

At summer's end, the cattle discovered a new weed, the Ex-Lax of its species, and the rest of the family spent their days in the hills forcing in pills to prevent weight loss. Niles got left at home with his wife, too sore to ride tall in the saddle or even slump in a pickup. He read every available *Reader's Digest*. He polished his boots, belts, spurs, and buckles. He spent long hours watching magpies settle on the bush skeletons that lined the dry creekbed, the view from their picture window. And all the time, Flo said nothing, her rocking chair going crip, crip, crip on the linoleum, echoing through the house like Chinese water torture.

"How's about I make us up a batch of martinis?"

"No thank you," she retorted, a Puritan pinch at the lips.

"A tiresome sort of day. What say we go upstairs and have ourselves a nap?"

At one time, thrown such a bone, she would have stripped to the buff and jumped him on the coffee table. Crip, crip, crip went the rocker. "You go ahead," she said, like the Ice Age advancing. "I ain't sleepy."

With fall approaching and the badlands turning blood-red and purple and gold, and a dirty wind tearing at the

eaves, he realized that he was a condemned man. The winter stretched ahead, a season of ass jokes and long grim silences. At Thanksgiving, a horde from the neighboring ranch came over with a thirty-pound turkey, and it started all over again, the turning fork to the pope's nose, the polite invitation to "Have a seat" always answered by "Offer it to Niles, he could use one." Flo had not said a word. She had not downed a drink, even.

"What do you want?" he asked one day, near the breaking point.

"They say Sheep Triumph got elected mayor. Course, he was the only candidate. Still, reckon we could have voted against him if we was in town."

"He'll be a shitty mayor."

"That ain't my point." She patted her bangs and folded her great arms. "They got a condominium for sale by the golf course. Hardly any down payment. Easy terms. Near where the action is."

"What action?"

"We been stuck out here while the cows get Montezuma's Revenge, and in town, the whorehouse is closed and Madame Marlyss is a nun and Sheep gets elected and Winn goes off the deep end and God knows what other exciting things, and here we set. We only got one life to live, Niles, and I say let's live it in the mainstream."

Niles scratched his good bun thoughtfully. They had discussed this very topic a million times before, but now he sensed Armageddon was nigh.

"You must think I'm made of money," he said.

"You got a third of this spread, and here are your choices for taking care of all that spare cash when you sell out. One, I divorce you on grounds the whole world

knows, it being in the papers, and I rake in the alimony."

"What's two?"

"You give me money to go live in town by myself."

"That'll be the day."

"Three, we move into one of them fancy condominiums by the golf course. Cheap at the price."

"How about four?"

"Why Niles, that's the most fun of all," she said with a tiny smile, her first in months. She popped a Twinkie and gazed out at the first scattered snowfall of the season, the rocker going crip, crip, crip. "We stay right here. Just as we are."

PART FIVE

The Fossil Beds

I

That winter was the worst to hit Shale County since the Whiteout Fodder Emergency Airlift Disaster of two years previous. Cars sank to their hubs from condensed tires; roofs buckled under; words and breath seemed to freeze in solid lumps as they hit the chinking air. Outside City Limits, cattle foundered ballocks-high and prairie dogs froze to Fudgsicles in their underground lairs. Deer, and even a few antelope, struggled in from the hills to starve by the striped garbage cans of Colonel Sanders, straining for the Grecian Bread.

It was the valley of the shadow for sure, Loreen thought, shivering naked on the scales of the basement bathroom. Father Grady had told her all about hell, which wasn't hot at all, but a frozen lake with Satan and Judas Priest gnawing their own innards as the other great sinners — Hitler, Stalin, and Martin Luther — groaned in the ice around. Now it struck her that God, in His infinite mercy, was giving her a taste of hell by bringing it to earth for her grievious faults. Mrs. Triumph blamed poor Hebb workmanship when the heating system broke down all the time, but Loreen knew the hand of God when she saw it. Nothing could be wrong with the furnace, after her scrubbing that summer, and hadn't she cleaned every thermostat in the house with Brillo and Mop & Glo?

No, the cold was heaven's vengeance, as was the fat. Her Western Look now burst at the seams, and try as she would to diet, sudden hunger would sweep like a whirlwind for the wienie casserole the nuns prepared at the Mission, with the cute little macaroni seashells like ears and the gold strips of Velveeta. But what could diet do, when His holy will wanted you to be a slob? God still punished her for pride in wanting Hebb destroyed, and her one Beatitude, telling Madame Marlyss about the Mission retreat, hadn't counted so much after all. For some reason, Mayor Triumph went all crabby and drunk after the whorehouse left town, and fought with Miz Triumph, and he was now on a separate vacation in the Last Stand Hotel. No, a simple good work wasn't enough. Heaven was showing her that agony and humiliation should not be forgot as the true centerpiece of the Faith, as was clear in the Passion, the Betrayal Denying Thrice, and the Immaculate Conception.

The fit for wienie casserole came upon her, so she got off the scales and put on Mrs. Triumph's shirred beaver, loaned as a gift with the heating so uncertain. The upstairs was empty, as usual, with the skillet clock ticking and Dustmop clawing shreds into Mrs. Triumph's flounced chintz. The other cats had long since gone, after Loreen had Brilloed them down on the first cold snap. It was too bad about the swans, too. God's message was loud and clear, and there was agony everywhere, if you got right down and looked, but not the kind of all-out, belly-crawling, boot-licking agony that caught His loving eye. Brow knotted in thought, Loreen went to the kitchen and devoured the rest of the wienie casserole, still warm from lunch.

Snow whirled at the windows and the miniature golf

course turned to a winter wonderland before her very eyes. It was harder being a saint in southeastern Montana than anywhere, she thought, with no caves or deserts to rot in, a hair shirt itching and a human skull in your hand and naked temptations along for the ride. Her eye fell on Mr. Triumph's junk mail by the side of the dead cactuses. Lots of free offers and unmatched opportunity, but Mr. Triumph never visited and Miz Triumph stayed upstairs in bed from dawn to dusk, soothing her nerves with medicinal Kahlua. Loreen stood quietly, watching the snow, the vision of how to combine agony with good works gathering slow but sure.

Over that festive season, folks got used to seeing her stout, furry figure trudging the two miles into town to deliver Mayor Triumph's mail to the Last Stand. The town thought this was pretty hard of Sheep, making the poor girl fetch and carry that way, since half the time she stood in the lobby for hours with Sheep too drunk to care. She didn't seem to mind, though. A few samaritans offered her a ride, figuring she'd catch her death with only the moccasins and the beaver coat, but she always refused. Then everybody wised up. It was crystal clear she was carrying Sheep Triumph's illegitimate baby and was trying out some Indian method of abortion.

One day close on Christmas, a giant of a man in a natural seal anorak and a three-piece suit stomped into the Last Stand lobby. He claimed to be Texas Jim Himmler of FARCO enterprises with an appointment with Mayor Triumph. The desk clerk hemmed and hawed and Texas Jim figured the mayor was either in his cups or in some broad. He always kept his ears open. Texas Jim Himmler had not reached his present position in FARCO by keeping his ears shut. He knew that Mayor Triumph

had not been in his office since election day. He understood that the mayor had gone into decline the minute his ex-wife, a brothel madame, had seen the light and joined a convent. Texas Jim didn't know whether to believe this or not. Hebb seemed such a dull little town on the surface.

Texas Jim went through the lobby and asked some of the old geezers embalmed on the leather sofas if they knew Mayor Triumph. It was legendary in the energy business how Texas Jim scouted out the local yokels in preparation for his fabulous deals. It's the groundwork, he was fond of saying in Dallas. But the geezers here only stared beady-eyed and opened and closed their mouths, as if snapping up gnats. Of course it was Christmastime, thought Texas Jim, and from the smell of it, the entire lobby was pickled in bourbon. Then a dark shape he had assumed was a stuffed bear came to life and tugged at his sealskin.

"Mayor Triumph is in the valley of the shadow," said a low, mournful voice. "On account of the agony and humiliation."

"Is that a fact?" His sharp business eye took in the bulge at her belly and he wondered if the girl were naked beneath the fur coat. He went back to the desk, and for a fee the clerk told him it was Mayor Triumph's Indian mistress, one of many, and the servant of Mrs. Triumph, the one who'd got raped in a burning building that summer. Texas Jim gave a low whistle. They'd never believe this back in Dallas, where the craziness was mainly political.

"I'll buy you a drink, while we're waiting for Mayor Triumph to come out of the valley," he said to the girl. In the booths for ladies she wouldn't drink, but ordered twin double jumbo-burgers with fries. "Don't the Tri-

umphs feed you?" he asked, as she packed it away hand over fist.

"Wienie casserole," she said sadly, "is all I ever eat."

"But the mayor must pay his employees top dollar."

"Oh I don't get me no pay. I do it for His blessing."

Talk about your exploitation, Texas Jim thought, shaking his head. Probably bought the girl off with that tacky fur coat. Then, on the inspired hunch for which he was famous in the business, he asked the girl if the Triumphs were rich.

"Poor as churchmice," she told him gloomily, mouth full of burger. "All tied up in no-good land. It's the cash flow, I heard him say that a million times."

"How about that!" Texas Jim exclaimed, mentally removing thirty percent from his already low offer. His own secret survey had confirmed the hunch. This fossil beds business might well be the masterpiece of a heroic career in fuels. Then the girl informed him that the town council was withholding the mayor's salary until he reported to work, and how there was no heat at the place, and the wife had nothing to eat but Kahlua. The cats and the swans were dead, he heard, of rabies. It was a vale of tears. And yet the mayor had made his cold, starved wife walk through the storm stark naked, teats out a mile, to join the whorehouse. Riveted, Texas Jim ordered the girl another mass of burger, and asked if the mayor had ever mentioned the fossil beds.

"Oh yessir. He says they ain't worth the powder to burn up. He says there is dirty fuels upon them, but the coal company is in the hands of the Arabs."

The FARCO offer slid down to half, and then another quarter, as Texas Jim calculated. If Mayor Triumph was in as bad shape as all that, he could buy the beds for a

song. Suddenly the girl dropped her fries and goggled at the stairway. Texas Jim gasped. Another Indian was descending, a voluptuous beauty in a Black Hills T-shirt so magnificent that Texas Jim forgot business for the first time in his life. "Mary Twotrees!" cried his furry friend. Washington, Lincoln, and the other presidents stilled their motion as the far more beautiful face above them flashed a scornful smile. After a quick huddle with the desk clerk, Texas Jim found that this was another of Mayor Triumph's dark mistresses. At least the man, for all his poverty and eccentricities, certainly ran the gamut!

"I got to help Mary," said Loreen. "Thank you very much for the snack."

"I'd like to meet this mayor of yours," Texas Jim cut in quickly. "What's his room number?"

Loreen told him at once, then squeezed her fur and girth out of the booth for ladies. "Me and Mary is real close," she said in passing. "Before Mayor Triumph, I used to sleep with her."

"You don't say."

Texas Jim paid the whopping lunch bill and then made his way past the embracing girls to the upper reaches of the hotel. Goddamn, he thought with a low whistle. Some called Dallas the cradle of corruption and labeled Fort Worth a city of sin, but he'd never seen anything in the whole sovereign state of Texas to match these one-horse, blowaway towns in southeastern Montana!

2

"Oh God, not wienie casserole again!" Winn cried as the girl served breakfast in bed. Loreen's favorite dish, beetlelike wads of franks drowned in cheese and peppers, made her stomach lurch. But the Flintstone tumbler of Kahlua was there, filled to the brim with no mix, no cracked ice. Loreen had never bartended before, of course. To her a drink was straight liquor on the rocks; well, there was one thing to be said for a convent education. Luxuriously, Winn sipped the bitter black liqueur and said, "I suppose Sheep hasn't sent any money."

"Nome."

"The heating people won't come again unless we pay them."

"Nome."

"Well, turn up the thermostat to a hundred and see what happens. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

Sheep himself had probably sabotaged the heating, she thought savagely, in some economy move. The town had cut off his salary, and he pretended not to remember their honeymoon agreement: he'd pay the bills, she'd provide the fun. What else was marriage about? Not that she'd been much fun lately. No parties, no gourmet meals. But what did he expect, another barbecue? "Sit down a minute," she invited, patting the quilt bedspread, an early-

American simulation from Gump's. "I get so lonely up here. I have no friends anymore."

"Nome."

The bed sagged a foot as Loreen sank into it, and Winn tsked at the extra pounds. Perhaps Indian women always added extra layers of fat for cold winters, she reflected.

"What does Sheep do in town?" she asked. "Does he see other women?"

"Oh, nome."

"I'll just bet. They say he's still grieving over the whorehouse, as if he'd ever been to it. It just goes to show how much I counted all those years."

She rubbed her armpit sulkily under the kimono, a steal from Hong Kong, the package tour. None of her wardrobe worked anymore on account of her sensitive skin and the Valium withdrawal. Nylon and rayon drove her to screaming fits, but the man in Hong Kong had assured her this kimono came from actual worms.

"I bet Indian skin doesn't itch," she said, after more Kahlua. "It all has to do with rapport with the wild."

"Yessum."

"You're closer to the land, coming as you do from your culture. You don't have guilt or fear. Not like some." Winn finished the tumbler, knowing there was an emergency bottle stashed in her lingerie in the Williamsburg chest. "And I was just being a good hostess. I needed the party to run smoothly, not that anybody cared. Nobody does. I mean, Niles wanted it so much, I thought, why not, nobody else wants it. I knew it wouldn't take more than a minute. You see, Floreen, I'd had him before."

"Yessum."

"In Cancun. Of course, I was not responsible for my

actions. You must believe that," she stated, although she had been conscious enough to see Sheep standing in the door with the turning fork, conscious enough to wonder what her husband was doing in the storehouse, where he had never set foot before. "I always let men tell me what to do. It's a pattern from my childhood Back East. The psychologist in Billings called it imprinting. Like seagulls. Did you know that seagulls have a red spot on their beaks that makes the baby seagulls do what they're told?"

"Yessum."

"Oh, you don't either. You're not even listening, and I don't blame you a bit. I know I'm boring. Better go get me another glass of Kahlua, and turn all the heat up downstairs too. Over a hundred. We'll either explode or freeze to death, we've got a choice."

Loreen lumbered off, and Winn thought perhaps Ayds would help, although they couldn't buy even wienies these days unless Sheep forked over more money. Of course, she had no savings, no cash, no skills. "You are a dependent personality type," the psychologist in Billings had said, and this was based on fear of rejection in the unconscious. It was so true, too! They were just working through her fear, when Rocky Mountain College declared the psychologist a frill and he had to leave. Some months later, she got a letter from him, saying that he now viewed psychology as a fraud and was going into computer programming, his first love. She missed him, for he had been a gentle, sad-eyed man who paid attention, though she realized that he had it all wrong. There was nothing secret in her unconscious, not the root, which was that she had killed her daddy, as everybody knew Back East in Minneapolis–St. Paul.

It had started the day she had come home from fashion school to find Daddy papering their front windows with Reynolds Wrap.

"It's the rays," he told her. "They're getting through."

Oh God, she thought, but they had a northern exposure and the furniture wasn't fading, so she couldn't figure it out. She didn't want to be a nag. Mother had been a nag, and her two sisters and she, left alone with Daddy at last, meant to make him happy in their little home.

Then he had the phone disconnected.

"They're getting through the wires," he explained.

"Who is, Daddy?" she asked, suddenly afraid in the foil-wrapped house, but he had put a forefinger to his lips and winked. He looked like anybody's father, stout and round in his clay-green workclothes, his suspenders, his yoke undershirt. His crewcut was salt-and-pepper, he wore tiny goldrim reading glasses like Benjamin Franklin on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and he had tanned, leathery skin that made some believe he had Indian blood. She knew he was only south German, Bavarian, but she told the kids at school she was related to Pocahontas. She was grown-up now, no princess, and stuck in a house with a man who thought They were destroying the world with rays. The trouble had been mandatory retirement, a rule of the Power Company to make sure old men had nothing to look forward to but home repairs and death after a lifetime's service. And Them.

One day she caught him in the dark kitchen, broiling the mail under gas. This shook her, for he loved the mail, and had a reputation in the philatelic world of the Twin Cities for his collection of France and Pacific Empire, with rare Tahiti overprints and the New Caledonia primitives, not to mention Wallis and Futuna, first-day covers.

The stamps, she had cried, horrified, but in fact the stamps were to blame. He drew her close, smelling of Prince Albert and Barbasol, and told her They had captured the post office. The rays could now be transmitted in the gum on the backs of the stamps. Right then she should have called a doctor and had him put away, but she had never made a decision on her own. Daddy had been the one. Daddy always knew. Finally she opened a box at the nearest postal station for bills and important letters, bringing home the junk mail for her father to barbecue.

A year passed in the perpetual smell of scorched paper. One soft spring day, with the buds a neon green in the pastel light and Minneapolis never lovelier, she had come home to find herself locked out. She banged and hammered. Somehow he had jammed the doors; he had always been handy around the house. She saw his eye once in an upstairs window, as the corner of the foil bent back, glaring out like Rumpelstiltskin's. Even then, she had made no decision, for the police had come of their own accord and forced a window. They found him holed up in a mop closet with enough canned goods to survive a nuclear holocaust. Professional Help, the police had suggested.

"Let me tell you about the mind doctors, Winnie," Daddy told her. "They start out as decent people, but then the rays get at their drugs. Pretty soon, They'll get the ordinary doctors too, and the aspirin. I don't want aspirins in this house."

"Daddy, please."

"They're poisoning the drinking water, too. It comes in the form of fluorides. We'll drink nothing but beer in this house as long as I'm a patriotic American. Schlitz is the only one. They've got Pabst and Budweiser already."

In her weakness, she bought a case of Schlitz, but that weekend finally gathered up enough common sense to visit her older sister in St. Paul. Joanie had married a Sanitary Engineer, rising to the top of the heap, but she had always been the beautiful one and deserved the split-level and the wall-to-wall.

"He's an old man," Joanie had comforted. "They go funny sometimes."

"Tell me what to do! I can't handle this by myself."

"Don't you just love my view? When the sun goes down, the flour mills sparkle like an ocean of jewels."

She went to the middle sister, the smart one, who had got In Trouble in teacher's college and was now a mother of five. As Ginny drooled on Winn's shoes and the youngest threw his Pablum against the wall, Hilda had called out: "You're asking me?"

"Should I have him put away, yes or no?" Winn had wailed.

"Suit yourself, Winnie. I'll go along with anything."

"Hilda, he's papered the windows with aluminum foil."

"So he thinks They're taking over, does he? God, Winn, They can have it."

When Daddy stopped eating meat and dairy products, Winn called the public nurse. The minute this boxy, no-nonsense lady got her foot in the door, Daddy snapped into normalcy. He showed the nurse his carpentry shop, the gems from his stamp collection. He claimed the aluminum foil was a stop-gap measure for insulation until they could afford to double pane. "The rays, Daddy," Winn encouraged, and the nurse wrote something in her notebook. Daddy offered the nurse a beer, his bluff, salt-of-the-earth charm turning her to putty in his hand. Later, on the sidewalk, the nurse told Winn that she looked tense

and should consult a doctor for tranquilizers, a new miracle drug called Valium.

Winn was furious with Daddy, but the pills calmed her down. She took to nipping from her private scotch bottle, to aid in serenity, and felt that she had done all that a daughter could. For Daddy's birthday, she brought home a bag of old mail from the post office box and together they had a letter-roast before the open fireplace. They played Parcheesi and drank Schlitz, as in the old days before They had invaded. Daddy got mellow and ruffled her hair, saying he was grateful for the way she'd sacrificed her life to care for an old man.

"You'll always be my little girl."

She almost purred. This was all she had ever wanted.

Suddenly he grabbed her shoulders. "You won't let Them take me," he pleaded in a harsh, Rumpelstiltskin way that chilled her blood. "Give me your word."

"I swear, Daddy," she reassured, yearning for a scotch. "Who would look after me then?"

The next morning, she had let the meterman in early, since Daddy did not allow strangers in their house. And so a stranger found him in the basement, the hedge shears in his hand next to the half-severed wires. They had got him, for who but They could have made her father violate the first rules of electricity? As serviceman for the Power Company, Daddy had known the rules better than any man alive. The cut wires still crackled and Winn had cried "The rays! They're leaking in!" until the meterman gently slapped her face. At the wake, her smart and beautiful sisters had said, "Why didn't you put him in a home, Winn?" "You didn't say it was so bad." "I can't help feeling that this could have been avoided, Winnie."

Oh God! Winn pushed back the quilt. Her bedroom

seemed hot as a Turkish bath and her flesh was crawling with ghost ants. She stumbled to the window, but it was a new kind, invented in Omaha, supposed to slide sideways on tooled grooves, but it never budged. She scratched at the Hong Kong kimono so hard it shredded. This was it. She could not go on another second. Pawing through the Williamsburg chest, she found her Kahlua bottle and wrenched off the cap. That was better. Sinking down to the rag rug, circles in circles, she drank gratefully. The pale winter sun shone across the floor in a plow shape, with a cutting edge. One tooth of light touched her bare toes. The rays. With a spasm, she jerked her foot away and toppled the TV table; the plate of wienie casserole tumbled down to the rug in an avalanche of cheese, wienie bugs, and green pepper worms.

It had happened. She was mad as her father. The thing she had waited for, longed for sometimes, ever since They had got him. The proof of her insanity stood in the doorway, an Indian princess more lovely than Pocahontas or anyone yet seen on earth, a vision, the raven hair falling lustrous over the ears, the eyes almond and obsidian. Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln gazed at her sternly, fathers of the country, and Winn wondered if it might not be Loreen, transformed by her own crazed mind into a symbol of the United States. But no, Loreen stood next to the vision in her beaver coat, like Before and After.

"This here's Mary Twotrees," said Before. "She fixed the furnace with a hairpin."

"I thought it seemed hot. Do you think she could open the window?"

Pocahontas stepped over Winn's casserole-strewn legs and yanked the window forward, then looked down with

a pleased, somehow sadistic smile. With horror, Winn realized she must look like some drunk squaw in a gutter, and struggled to get up, but it was no use.

"You better hire Mary on, Miz Triumph," said Loreen.

"What? Hire her?" Winn was beginning to get angry. Who did these Indians think they were? "No, Loreen, I can't give jobs to every friend of yours who walks in off the street. And who would pay her salary? We can barely afford you."

The beautiful Indian did not appear pleased at this, and Winn wished she hadn't been so forceful: there was something terrifying about such perfect, masklike loveliness. Loreen didn't seem pleased either.

"Have to leave you pretty soon anyways, Miz Triumph. Mary says I'm p.g."

"P.g.?"

"With child, Miz Triumph."

"I know what p.g. means, but Loreen, after all we've done for you!" Winn lunged for the Kahlua bottle, her only comfort in a world gone crazy. No sooner had she lifted it to her lips, than it was snatched away by Pocahontas.

"Drunken pig!" said the girl, and as Winn sputtered for reply, she had taken the bottle into the bathroom. Soon there was the sad, hiccupping glug of liquor being poured out. Then the toilet was flushed.

"Why, how dare you!" Winn cried when the girl returned with a towel and a bar of soap. "That's my best French milled beauty bar. Who said you could barge into my house, without a by-your-leave?"

"I invited her," Loreen said forlornly. "She fixed the furnace."

"I don't care if she painted and redecorated. I'm a sick

woman, but I'm not dead yet." Winn raved on, but she realized the girls weren't listening. Loreen had a depressed, faraway look, and the beauty swiftly cleaned casserole pieces from the floor, swooping down on the squalid frankfurter bits like an owl killing mice.

"See how hard Mary works?" Loreen said. "Please take her on, Miz Triumph. It's the least I can do, after you been so good to me."

Mary straightened the TV table and fluffed the pillows so the goosedown flew. "Catch!" she called, throwing the towel and soap into Winn's lap. "Follow me, Mrs. Triumph. You need a bath. You stink."

"Well, really!" Winn exclaimed, but of course, a nice hot bath would certainly relax her nerves. She'd been wearing the same peignoir for weeks, too, and the front was stained with cheese and Kahlua. Sniffing discreetly, she realized that her skin smelled like old coffee grounds. Pocahontas stood before her and extended strong, lovely brown arms to help her up off the floor, and with a timid smile, Winn finally accepted them. Then she followed her new servant to the bathroom, like a little girl.

3

"Yoo hoo," screamed Flo. "I'm home."

No answer, but she hadn't expected any. She stood a few minutes in the living area, admiring her new senorita art pictures, all lacy shawls and glowing boobs on brush-

mark board. The roses between the senoritas' teeth exactly matched the flame carpet, wool and Orlon, and the bolero drapes with the sexy black ball fringe, the upholstery on the Mediterranean Modern couch and matching suite. Although it was still daylight, she switched on the bullfighter lamps, twin toreros in tight bulgy trousers. Olé, she said to herself. She wouldn't half mind a good screw, she thought, and not for the first time.

As usual, she found Niles on his cherry Barcalounger in the rec room, moldering before the TV. He wore old boxers and his plaid bathrobe, no Olé about that, especially with his gut advancing so regularly. It had been months, and still he hadn't adjusted to the urban pace. For her part, what with the decorating and her crash grapefruit and tuna diet at the Ladies of the Moose, she looked like a new person. She posed by the Barcalounger in her new slacks and caboose, sex on the hoof, but he didn't unglue his eyes from the program. It was one of those dumb giveaway shows, where prizes got hidden behind curtains, and the audience screamed advice, and you didn't have to do a solitary skillful thing to win.

"How can you watch this doo-doo?" she asked, switching off the set as some poor turkey chose the dog food instead of the Love Boat cruise. Niles didn't even have the gumption to hit her.

"Wish you'd turn that back on," he said mildly, reaching for beer and a Twinkie. " 'The Crosswits' is next."

"Wish you'd go downtown and drink, like other husbands," she said testily. "So they make a few jokes about your ass. You're a big boy, you can take it."

"It's boring downtown, ain't a thing to do."

"Well, take up a hobby." She glanced at her shelf of Dolls of Many Nations, her own new educational interest.

It was the unwritten rule at Ladies of the Moose that you didn't get to be an officer, much less Faith, Hope or Charity, without a creative outlet. With the dolls, she'd found the handle to beat out Lemoine MacIlhenny's dumb old matchbooks, and even Esther Glick's shoe collection. There was Senorita, in her ball fringe mantilla, and the French doll in pantalettes, called Mamzelle, and the Polish one she called Polonaise, after one of the great composers. "If I had the time to set around all day like you, I'd do all the world and start on boy dolls."

"I can't sew," he whined. "Hey, turn on the TV, so's I can see 'The Crosswits.' "

"Never mind that, I got real interesting news. I was up at All Souls' this morning, doing my volunteer visits for the Ladies' Aid, and who do you think? In maternity. Remember that Indian out at the Triumphs'?"

He groaned, and she realized she'd touched a sore spot. Jesus, the way he carried on about that, you'd think nobody'd ever been stuck in the ass with a fork before!

"There she was with this kid, and so I says, just for politeness sake, I says, what's its name, honey-pot? Know what she says? Valentine, for the saint's day — which it was last week, and you never got me a card. And here's the real shit-kicker. Triumph for the middle name. Can you believe that? Could have whomped me with a feather."

She sat on the arm of the Barcalounger in a friendly way, but he levered it upright and turned on the set. A soap commercial boomed. Some interviewed claimed oily dirt was the worst, others held out for food stains. There was a hidden camera.

"Damn your hide, Niles Hardesty, ain't you even concerned? Here that high-and-mighty Sheep Triumph has

gone and fathered a half-breed bastard, after all that fuss about you poking his candy-ass wife."

"She led me on."

"God, if you was anything then like you are now, she probably had to use a winch and pulley," she said snappishly, moving away. "Why didn't you tell me you'd turn into a dishcloth the minute we got to town? Here I've gone and lost all this weight. I thought you liked them thin."

"Hey, she won the Samsonite ensemble already," he exclaimed. "But this round is a toughie. You know a four-letter word for 'truth or consequences'?"

"Shit," said Flo, going to the back bar and dialing Frieda Schweintz, president of the Ladies of the Moose. Till the end of "The Crosswits" they talked about the bastard child and Mayor Triumph's affair with Loreen Bright Weasel, which explained why the mayor had holed himself up drinking in the Last Stand Hotel, the town council drooling to impeach him. They both agreed it was a woman's duty to phone Winn and tell her every filthy thing, and Flo felt Frieda should bear the awful burden, since, as the wife of Winn's ex-lover, she figured there was a certain delicacy involved. She hung up the receiver feeling a million times better. It was exciting being right at the center of the action, even if you weren't getting any yourself. Niles would come round. If she got any sexier, how could he resist? she asked herself. Then applause from the game shows of Hollywood filled the rec room and her once-handsome husband crooned with delight as the panel guessed the hidden meaning of the riddle: THE MIRACLE WORKER.

4

News of that blessed event, Valentine Triumph Bright Weasel, received mention in the "Cattle Call Roundup" column of the *Hebb World*. Normally, "Cattle Call Roundup" never paid much heed to birth, especially Indian ones, being more concerned with marriage and divorce, the true business of society. Nobody questioned the announcement though. In Hebb, folks were used to reading between the lines. Besides, the Triumph part was in italics, to make it stick.

At All Souls', the nuns showed Loreen how she'd made the newspapers, and were kind of miffed when she turned away. "Unnatural mother," they whispered to each other in the cafeteria, as if a half-breed bastard was cause for rejoicing. The Sisters were all soft on little Valentine, and who wouldn't be, with his fat, brown, uncircumcised teddy bear body and his gurgly good nature? But the mother lay like a stone when they brought the baby in, and spoke out the Act of Contrition, which even the nuns thought was pushing penitence too far. They oohed and aahed over the baby, trying to coax Loreen into love by example, but she just stared. Of course, they couldn't read her inmost thought, which was that no saint she'd ever heard of had ever given birth, or even screwed worth mentioning.

She recalled St. Cecilia at her organ, St. Agnes with her virgin teats, and she despaired. The doctor told her it was only post-purple depression, but she knew about the Dark Nights of the Soul, with St. Theresa jammed in the burning wall, Christ in the olives. She always figured the Dark Night would be kind of interesting, but it wasn't. Many an evening she lay in Maternity, staring at the woolly sky and deep-frozen buttes, the pink chicken bucket of Colonel Sanders turning in slow agony on its iron pole. Her thoughts lay sour as yesterday's dishwater, her soul wallowed and dragged through the deadly sin of the sloths.

God wasn't much help, though He tried.

"Now Loreen," came His voice in the whirlwind that rattled the venetian blinds. "Recall your good warks."

"Name one."

"But there are many. Through you, the scarlet woman has been saved from her life of indacency and parvarsion. Now the people must go to alleys and byways for their impure deeds."

"Big deal."

"Through you, that man that sang the Indian Maid song has reformed his ways. He watches TV. His wife has lost a hundred pounds. This is all your doing, child."

"I don't care about them."

"And what of those you love, selfish garl? Before your coming, Mr. Triumph was not mayor. He had not sold the fossil beds that caused him so much distress and pain."

"He wasn't such a drunk, neither."

"Grace can't do everything, child. There's such a thing as free will. Ah, if the people only realized how much they owe you! Did you not bring Mary Twotrees and Winn together, to assist one another in their hour of need, like

Mary and Martha? It goes beyond the merely parsonal. As an Indian, you have turned your other cheek, bringing tidings of great joy to the white race, in return for their history of bloodshed and oppression."

"If I'm so great, how come I feel like a big bag of chicken shit?" she whimpered. "Name one saint that got herself a kid without no daddy."

"Swate Jasus," sighed God. "And you a valedictorian."

One evening as she lay like a sack of meal, Valentine trying to suck, the final horror arose. Pa loomed in the darkness, the instrument of God's wrath and rod, looking at the bent glass straw in the water beaker. He turned slowly, his eyes like ember under the slope leather hat with the rattler band. She smelled sulphur, but the hospital water smelled like that anyway. In the twilight, the other women lay sleeping in mounds, for how could any but the damned see a mocking fiend? He bent over her, and she breathed in tarry tobacco and the stink of his old buffalo coat. He touched the baby.

Her tired arms sprang to life, but too late: he had grabbed Valentine and was lifting him high, his stained teeth whispering a strange devil language. Loreen struggled to rise, but her week with sloths had caused the flex to go clean out of her limbs and she couldn't manage. The baby was babbling back in its own strange tongue. Then he gummed out a grin, and Pa gummed one back. To her astonishment, Pa next stooped down and replaced the baby in her arms, where she hugged it something fierce.

"Ain't he cute?" Pa said in English. "Why don't you bring him on back to the Reservation, Loreen? I got the place fixed up real nice."

"Pa, is that really you?"

"Got out at Christmas, but I couldn't figure where you'd gone to."

"You look funny," she said, still wary. She had been fooled before. "Didn't they feed you up at Warm Springs?"

"Well, they give me shock. It wasn't no treat, but I won't be going at you with knives no more."

He brushed a tangle of hair from her eyes and the fingertips seemed rough and solid enough.

"I'm sorry, Loreen."

"Oh, that's okay."

It was as if the sun had rent a hole through her Dark Night, as if, out of the pits, God brought forth His miracle of love. She held Valentine close and from her breast flowed forth a dayspring, for she now realized that the vision was not Pa, but another vision behind him, which had been there in the corner of Maternity all the time, but she'd been too blinded to notice it. There, a chipped white plaster statue of the Virgin Mary held forth her child in a single palm, His head crowned, His fingers upraised in the Sign of Three, a fatherless child when you got to thinking about St. Joseph and that dove. Yet Mary had remained a virgin despite it all — which wasn't too easy and gave room for a lot of meaningful thought as to interpretation — and had been about as sainted as a person could be and still stay flesh-and-blood female, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears, while Queen of Heaven above, a model for all girls who had gone and done it, but who hadn't sort of really meant it to stick.

5

That February 2, the groundhog at Shale County Alfalfa Research Station had snouted its way up through the drifts and had gone berserk from rabies, without a glance at its shadow. As was proper, the head had been mailed to State University for tests, but folks were uneasy. What had nature been trying to say? The message seemed pretty clear throughout March and April, as squalls swept the tundra of Main Street, but then there was a chinook, a warm teasing wind under blue skies rich with the balsa wood smell of freshly melted snow. People ran gibbering from their houses, wild-eyed and in shirtsleeves; kids built snowmen without fear of frostbite or amputation; familiar objects, long forgotten — fire hydrants, roofs, the shapes of streets — were seen once again. One of these familiar objects was Mayor Sheep Triumph.

Many noticed him as he stood glazed and tottering in the sunlight on the Last Stand porch. He looked haggard and heavy, about ten years older, and liverish around the gills, with that gray cottage-cheese roughness of skin that comes to those who get smashed every single day. And yet, despite all, a certain jauntiness of bearing was displayed. The *Hebb World* had reported his sale of the fossil beds to FARCO for "an undisclosed sum," and most figured Sheep for a wealthy man again. In point of fact,

he had made just one dollar an acre under purchase price, and counted himself lucky. The nation wasn't ready for coal, despite its loose talk, and FARCO could afford to wait.

As he drove home for the first time in months through the shining, voluptuous streets, he could scarcely believe the days of eternal night that had passed by. Now he knew the full sinister meaning of Midlife Crisis. After his election, a slow molasses kind of fear had overtaken him, spreading through his limbs and mind so he couldn't do a thing but curl up in the brass bed at the Last Stand and drink from the bottle. It wasn't fear of anything specific; just the opposite. It was a fear that there wasn't anything specific. Things like the sun rising over Main, the crud-stained floor, the Mount Rushmore Indian girl at his side, had brought no meaning, but offered instead a sort of fingernail-scraped-on-the-blackboard nag. As time crawled through the empty, shimmering absence of each day, he yearned for infarctions, clots, even cancer, to perk things up. Only the bottle drowned this horror, and he got so he couldn't bear the taste.

The house looked tidy and fresh, the walks neatly shoveled and the wishing well bright with a new tin roof. Around it, though, stood a herd of women's cars, a cheap rainbow of Gremlins, Pintos, Corollas, and Darts. Sheep swallowed his annoyance, deciding that Winn must have found herself a new set of friends, a good sign. It would be nice to chit-chat with his wife again: the separate vacation had stretched itself into outright monkhood. He went inside, and there, in his own living room, ran smack into three altars labeled FAITH, HOPE, and CHARITY. At a long table in front of the blazing fireplace, women in evening gowns and tiaras plied their forks over Winn's best

china, imported from England. A slim, strangely familiar lady in a blonde beehive with bangs stood at the front, holding up a doll. Was it a seance? A voodoo coven?

"This here is Brünnhilde," said the beehive, "the doll from Nazi Germany."

Jarred, he went into the kitchen, where a college girl in jeans and a sloppy sweatshirt stood at the island stove pouring brandy over a bowl of cherries. "Just a minute, Mary," said Winn's voice, and he saw it was his wife's tense throat, her hands. But she wasn't wearing makeup and she'd let her hair go straight and mousy, cropped short. She looked very young and frail, not half bad in a concentration-camp sort of way. He cleared his throat.

"Winn, what's going on in the living room? Have you joined the Moonies?"

"So it's you, is it?"

The voice was tough, and she capped the brandy bottle without a farewell swig, unknown in the Winn he had married. There was applause from the next room.

"It's the Ladies of the Moose hobby lunch," she told him, stirring the cherries. "It was Kiwanis yesterday, Rotary the day before. I do rabbit in sage. We start on dinners next week, when we get our license."

"You're cooking? For money?"

"Have to get it somewhere. It seems to be working, too. Only place in town you can buy a gourmet meal. Hand me those matches, will you?"

"You've been doing this all by your lonesome?"

"No, there's the Indian."

"Oh, Loreen. God, fat lot of help she must be."

"How can you, after what you did?" Her clear eyes burned him with contempt. "Such a sweet, innocent thing, too. We asked her to stay, but she wouldn't. Probably

too humiliated. Oh Sheep, and to think I trusted you once."

"Winn, what is this?"

"Don't you come near me, you sonofabitch. Not a word to me, and I'll bet you didn't even pay out a cent."

"All that's over now," he protested, completely bewildered. "I've got lots of money now. I sold the fossil beds."

As usual, when the talk turned to money, she became abstracted. Carefully she poured coffee into cups, a long row of them, and he asked himself why the hell all his wives wanted to work for a living when there was plenty of bread in the kitty. Then the cellar door opened and another strangely familiar woman emerged. This one, though, was too beautiful to be real, a movie star. A white hostess gown draped over perfect tawny breasts. Rhinestone clips, also strangely familiar, at the ears. They shone like stars under the fall of her blue-black hair. She carried, in lovely coral-nailed hands, bags of Fig Newtons.

"This is my husband, Mary. Sheep, Mary is my partner in the catering service. In fact, you might say she's the boss." The stark, college-girl version of Winn came toward him, hand on hip, and he thought, soon I will wake up on the floor of my room at the Last Stand, this particular nightmare over, part of the climacteric. "We want you to lend us some money to roof over the patio for extra space. You said you had lots, and I think you owe us something for you-know-who."

So she knew. The Indian girl's brown eyes rested on him briefly, amused and dangerous, as Winn lit the cherries in a whoosh. Then his wife held open the door, as Mary marched in to the Ladies of the Moose bearing a holocaust of jubilee. "*Epi ha*," said the girl in passing as if he were no more than a cowpie on the gumbo, and for

the first time Sheep got some true sense of what the musical Crow syllables actually meant.

The false spring was over. As he drove back into town, a Siberian-toothed snowstorm flung itself against his windshield and in the lobby of the Last Stand it looked as if the codgers were burning the Yule Log as they drank and cackled before a blazing fire. Slowly it dawned on him that the drinks had been bought at his expense. News of his FARCO deal had leaked out and they assumed he was rich. He said nothing to make them think different. Piggy Waldron and Earl Normandy were practically licking his boots. Chunk Bovee offered Sheep a private spit in his own antique brass spittoon. Boy, the hotel dog, came padding over and lovingly showed that everything he had was Sheep's.

It sure explained what made the world go round. Here he had wasted all winter brooding over Marlyss and the way she'd gypped him again, as if he wasn't old enough to have learned that the female of the species always devoured the male. No, there was nothing in life worth trusting but a fellow man, Sheep thought, as fellow men broke out the expensive stuff at his expense. Then his eye caught the headlines in that day's *World*: A NEW DAWN! Hebb's business slump was over, it said. That very day, Texas Jim Himmler, the FARCO whiz-kid, had announced a spectacular find at the old fossil beds. There was more than third-rate coal and dinosaur tusks under the natural beauty, as it turned out, and more than even oil-shale, difficult to process, expensive to ship. No, after Indians, ranching, dog food, and whoring, the new pioneering future of Hebb floated serenely on a priceless reservoir of pure and secret natural gas.

PART SIX

The Gas Boom

I

After the white tomb of the winter, May hit Shale County like a stone rolled away. In the hills everything thawed at once in a rush of resurrection, sending a wall of brown water down through the surprised Tongue River valley and flooding lower Hebb up to the veranda of the old, deserted Triumph Place. An Atlantis of lawns rose brown from the snow, revealing forgotten rakes, gloves, tricycles, cans, and even a few lost pets. As a blaze of sun sucked up the waters, the world gave off comehither saps: branches glowed green from buds, nests showed eggs gleaming like opals, and dogs scooted their hind ends over the swampy grass, red-pricked and panting. On side streets, young men spent their days with heads under the hoods of used cars, as girlfriends sat sullen in shorts on the curb plotting unwanted pregnancies. The soft air stank of manure, joy, and reproduction, and Flo Hardesty was about to climb the walls.

"All right, you win," she said to her three-hundred-pound pale dead slug of a husband. "We'll go back to the ranch. You can ride the range all you want, as long as we can find a horse that won't flatten. You're just bored here in town, and it's all my fault."

"Hell, Flo, I ain't bored," he said, lifting his binoculars to watch a ladies' foursome clomp past on the golf course

behind the condominium. "Would you look at that Gladdie Mae's drive? I swear she's going to bogie the hole."

"Wouldn't catch me out in purple pedal pushers, if I had a can like that," grumbled Flo, calling attention, in a sideways kind of fashion, to the pear-shaped beauty of her own. But in vain. Niles marked down something on the scorepad, and then zeroed in on the foursome newcomers at the ball-wash. It had all started the day he had torn his eyes away from "The Gong Show" to see old Doc Frye beat a rattler to death with his putter on the sand green beyond their lilacs. The TV was cold day after day as he watched for a rerun, and Flo bought him the complete *Arnold Palmer Guide* in hopes he would take a real, activated interest, but so far the appeal was only armchair.

By June it was warm enough for him to go outdoors. He lay on an oatmeal chaise longue she had purchased for a song at the Triumph's garage sale, shoveling in the booze and junk food, totting up the hooks and slices, the bogies and eagles and birdies, apparently content, like so many middle-aged men, to make golfing his life. That month, Flo was elected First Lady of the Moose, but it wasn't enough. She participated in charity drives to help the poor. She organized parties and merchant's novelty days to help the rich. She dyed her hair a purple midnight black, restructured her wardrobe, and overhauled her smell, and Niles didn't drop his binoculars once. With her female Dolls of Many Nations unmatched, she started in on the males, sewing the flies into tiny lederhosen and Turkish bloomers that long hot summer, prey to imagination. Her husband slumped in the back yard like a whale beached for suicide. Was he punishing her for getting

this damned condominium? Restlessly roaming the house, she regretted every stud.

And yet, looking back later, she realized it was the condominium that finally saved her. As with every new-built home across America, each gadget and convenience had been designed to self-destruct a few months after purchase, and as her husband kept his eye on the ball, she was inside pointing out to plumbers, gasmen, electricians, and service representatives what exactly was wrong with various outlets, orifices, ball-and-cock mechanisms, taps, spigots, and drips. Like many people newly slim, she did not understand that she had changed in the world, and it was weeks before it struck home that her fun, dirty jokes and sloppy housecoats, the mark of old fat Flo, sent out new coded signals to men in overalls with toolboxes.

"Say, what kind of gal do you think I am?" she asked the plumber, the first time he locked the bathroom door and gave a grunt, the meaning of which could not be denied. "I told you, the plunger mechanism's on the fritz."

"Anybody ever tell you that you look like Doris Day?" he breathed, flinging down the seat. Vaguely, she tried to get away, but, also like so many of the once-fat, she had no sense of her shape in space and stumbled awkwardly. Later, headache gone and coffee nerves melted away, she had the grace to feel guilty, since she had never cheated on Niles, despite all her teasing and come-ons. In fact, before this, nobody had ever offered, as how could they out at the ranch with nothing but cows and brother-in-law incest as potential? Could it be the liberation she had read about in the women's magazine with the naked equipment? She swore never again, but that

very next day, with Niles bloated with pleasure before the Kiwanis round robin, she lost her head with the dryer repairman and a special delivery from the post office.

Suddenly all the magazine clichés about modern marriage began to make sense, as if a new language had been translated through Pentecost. There had to be give and take, and there was, with Niles happy at spectator golf, and her giving and taking upstairs. The woman had to assert her rights, which she was doing. A couple should be friends, not just lovers, and she liked Niles well enough, in the way one gets attached to senile Saint Bernards or old armchairs. And then, all the new bang-up permissive attitudes toward sex in society practically ordered her to open out. What else was urban life for, if not to expand your horizon?

On the Fourth of July, she opened the front door in her Spanish lace peignoir, expecting, despite the holiday, the man who caulked and grouted her tiles, but finding instead three burly strangers in sideburns and army-fatigue trousers.

"We were told to come here for a good time, ma'am," said one in a polite southern accent. "We're new in town, you see, with the FARCO project, and —"

Face aflame, she slammed the door. Home repair was one thing, but when did liberation turn into out-and-out whoring? When you charge for it, answered the portraits of Spanish senoritas, the rows of elaborate native dolls in native garb. Her anxious eye lighted on a sheaf of bills under the full skirt of Crinoline, the doll from the Confederacy, bills which she had not summoned nerve enough to show Niles. The cost of repairs to a new house was enough to make you drop your teeth. And those three FARCO boys had looked nice enough. Might as well cash

in on Hebb's new dawn, while improving her marriage. No point messing with the mouths of gift horses.

Later, near sunset, she joined her husband out back, feeling radiant and fresh from a cooling bath with oil-pearls and getting her back scrubbed thrice over. It was a fine, sweet evening, with the sky pinky-purple in the east, and husband-and-wife twosomes scrambling through the rough or teeing off by the ball-wash. Relaxed and slim in her peignoir, seventy-five dollars in its heart-shaped breast pocket, she stretched out on a lawn chair by the oatmeal chaise and grasped Niles's chubby hand. Twenty-five bucks apiece, more than mere pin money.

"Did you have a good day, hon?" she asked. He was enthusiastic. There had been a big fight among husband, wife, and caddy in the sand trap beyond their rotisserie. He had figured out the problem with B. V. Hertz's backswing and Gloria Buckle's hook. There had been a hole-in-one, not with a mashie at all, or even a wood, but a nine-iron . . .

Not understanding most of it, Flo cast her eye to the heavens where golden-green sparks from early skyrockets bloomed already in the sweet-smelling air. Someone yelled "fore" from faraway, and there was the thock of a hook or a slice as her husband crowed. Never before had she felt such peace, her marital happiness at last assured, her own needs looked after, her husband absorbed in retirement pursuits. It was true that no matter how rocky a marriage started out, it would reach its own kind of balance after a time. And there would be so many new men in Hebb with the dawn of the gas boom: she probably should rent an office in town and hire on extra help. Winn Triumph and her Indian friend might have some space.

2

But Winn Triumph's catering place was bursting at the seams, one of the many Hebb success stories riding on the coattails of gas. Main Street flourished. Overnight, mobile homes had multiplied like blowflies around the city limits, motor bikes roared like jackhammers through the badlands night, and a new breed of cowboy walked Main with transistors at their ears and shirts that glowed in the dark. Some of the bars tried to lure this trendy crowd, but Hebb lounges had been designed for old men in despair, and the new Triumph Place, with its miniature golf, its flaky bird sanctuary out back, its wishing well, and roofed-in patio, appealed more to the gas types than brass rails, ceiling fans, and Eddy Arnold. Then, after Independence Day, Mary installed the biggest draw of all, a mechanical bucking bronco. You fed coins into a slot, set the dial, and bet money as you tested your manhood by bashing it against the saddle.

"Oh God," said Winn when she saw it uncrated. It was a big hairy torso, with no attempt at a head or tail or human representation. "Are you sure about this, Mary?"

"Yes," Mary said firmly, and Winn felt it was all right. Mary knew. Winn had protested the shift from gourmet to tacos and chili dogs, but their take had tripled the first week. She had been horrified at their first live band,

Scorched Earth and His Screaming Zits, whose songs, when translated, seemed to be about violence and death by chains. The gas crowd loved it. Winn knew that folks said the Indian was taking her for a ride — her lawyer had warned her about signing a partnership and even Sheep had bothered to send a questioning note — but Mary was the brains behind the Triumph Place, Winn the obedient follower.

Winn had wanted to call it something else.

"The old Triumph Place was a whorehouse," she told Mary. "Sheep would go crazy if we used Triumph here." Mary had only smiled her lovely cruel smile, and the familiar name seemed to add to their success. Not that success came easy. Winn's hands had never been so rough, nor her clothes so second hand, although Mary always looked a picture in the hostess gowns from Hart-Albin's and I. Magnin's. In truth, the Triumph Place often scared Winn, especially on Saturday nights, when she peered out of the kitchen as the customers screamed and stomped and attacked each other. By now, though, she realized that her ideas of manners and décor belonged to another age, and she tried hard to accept the Contemporary.

At first, she had balked at certain things. "I'm a married woman," she exclaimed in shock and confusion, and then Mary had urged her to talk about the married part. Well, Sheep had been romantic enough on the honeymoon, though missing again and again as she lay there feeling like a fool. But then he had given up on love, still grieving over his bordello wife. He had cracked up when Marlyss took the veil, drinking his life away in the Last Stand, and everybody saying, poor Winn, doesn't she count for anything? As Winn spoke of her marriage, her psychologist, and her father, Mary ate licorice Nibs and

gazed naked at the ceiling with her black unreadable eyes and Winn had somehow come round to admitting that her life with men had not been all that rich and satisfying when you got right down to the nitty-gritty. But to go for such a change of pace, and at her age, too! She still had trouble believing it.

"That was Flo Hardesty," she said, hanging up the patio phone after the Fourth of July weekend. "She wants to rent some space out here to entertain men friends. I swear, Mary, sometimes I think I am going mad."

"Who is this Flo?"

Then Winn told her about the barbecue night, which seemed to be very quaint and Victorian and faraway, given the kind of lewd things that went on almost every night at the Triumph Place now. Winn glanced around at the patio, a shambles from the weekend. All the chairs and tables were chained to the floor, for the gas crowd stole everything that wasn't nailed down. Inside, the ceiling gaped open from the homemade fireworks, letting in a bright scrap of sky; a wrecked camper van sat in the middle of the dance area; even the bucking bronco, guaranteed indestructible, looked the worse for wear.

"We could let her use the new storehouse," Winn said with an impish smile. "There's nothing in there now but some old cots. And it would be a kind of justice."

"She is a friend of yours?"

"I don't know if I'd . . . well, yes. From long ago."

"I have heard them speak of her. They call her the Hole-in-One."

"Flo? Oh, surely not. She was so upset when her husband . . ."

"She is very pretty?"

"Flo? My God, not at all. She's terribly overweight."

"Liar," hissed Mary suddenly. Then she slapped Winn's face and walked off.

For a moment, Winn stood absolutely stunned, tears stinging her eyes. Mary had called her names before. Mary was, in fact, angry and temperamental most days, hissing and walking away. Sheep was moody, too, and Daddy got touchy, although Daddy had not been responsible. But nobody had ever struck Winn so hard, and now, for the first time, she realized that Mary Twotrees really cared for her. To think it should be over jealousy of Flo Hardesty, of all people, but still, it had been a lover's jealousy.

Oh God, thought Winn, reverently kneeling down as shafts of light poured from above, through the splintered ceiling. She picked her scrub brush out of the pail of ammonia mixed with Mr. Clean and started in on the floor, resolving that this would be the best, most thorough cleansing ever done. Sheep had never cared enough to hit her, even when he'd caught her red-handed, so to speak, with another man. Her father had been too absorbed with Them to strike the living, and her sisters never respected her enough to try even a friendly pummel, a sisterly slug. But Mary had slapped her full across the mouth, and at last, in the middle years of her life, Winn Triumph felt she had joined the human race.

3

Sister Maryliss?"

"I'm not a Sister, only Lay," Marlyss said mechanically, but it was old Sister Evita, not expected to remember theological details. "Never mind. Please come in. Is it your boils again? Did you try vitamin A?"

"There's a young girl downstairs, wants to be a nun."

"Sister Evita, ask someone else. I'm not even a nun, not a real one. How can I give advice?"

"The rest have all gone on the wienie roast for the Fourth of July, Sister Marlyss, and you always know the right thing to do."

It was true, Marlyss thought: the reward for knowing the right thing to do was that you got to do it. And she had been so looking forward to an afternoon alone, meditating for a change, away from the Girls. But as the old woman stood there eagerly, wearing the last pair of harlequin pants in captivity, with Gypsy hoop earrings, Marlyss had no choice but to give in and invite the girl up. She would have to talk about harlequin pants at the table tonight, but where on earth did they find such things? The nuns were in the process of changing their traditional habit, a starched iron maiden designed originally to increase penance during the Black Plague. Some of the nuns hadn't worn street clothes since the New Deal, and

they came to Marlyss, the worldly one, for advice on how to set off circle pins and Peter Pan collars, whether they should wear pumps with angora sweaters and cinch belts.

Marlyss had assumed they would shun her as a Fallen Woman, but it soon became clear that her skills from the real world were prized above rubies. As to a great healer, they approached with shy questions about fungal infections, pads, and suppositories, and her frank manner of spelling things out had earned her the last thing she wanted on earth, popularity. Used to juggling accounts at the brothel, she gave such useful tips to Sister Ramona that she found herself in charge of the bakery and the moccasin concern. Acting on one of her idle comments about the all-white statues in the Chapel, the younger nuns painted them tan to match the congregation, and the *Billings Gazette* picked up the story to show new trends in a hidebound Church. She was a hit.

Naturally, she had enemies. Mother Januarius, the one who looked so hauntingly like a prominent historical figure — was it Bach? Stalin? Orson Welles? — had already criticized Marlyss's plan for the sewing room, and it was a fight to the death. Some of the Sisters were nice, though, and some were even holy, but there were days when her surroundings seemed like complete déjà vu. Why had she closed the Triumph Place for this?

The question fretted her in the narrow convent room that Fourth of July while she awaited the latest seeker of faith. Of course, she was only on retreat, inspired by Sheep's unexpected anxiety and the Bright Weasel girl's insistence. Did she really mean to take the veil? She liked the convent itself. Her room was a cell, with a severe, arched window that looked out on faraway desolation. Through a virtuously tattered rug shone a ribcage of floor,

and the crucifix on the wall, sturdy and huge, was so worn that it might have been put to use by some dwarf penitent. Even the janitor's cleaning compound put one in mind of gall and wormwood, hyssop on a sponge. It was the part of Catholicism she appreciated, the Finnish part.

Was it better to end life as an old nun or an old whore? Surely one was more distinguished and respectable than the other. As, in an examination of conscience, she tried to figure out which, a goose walked barefoot on her grave. There was no mistaking the apparition in her doorway, all in white linen and probably cold as the clay, the bosom still generous, the dumb eyes glittery, the bunny overbite slightly stained with lipstick. It was Velva Rose Compass, back from death's door, all parts reassembled.

"Hey, honey, is this where you go to be a nun?"

"My God, Compass, is that you?"

"Well, shit, pardon my French, who knows me in here? If it ain't Madame Marlyss, now if that ain't a sight. Never figured to meet you in here." The girl gave Marlyss a hug, solid flesh.

"I might," she said faintly, "say the same of you."

"Oh, it's the old familiar story. I mean, you know there's days I wonder if God was behind the door when He handed out brains."

Not addressing herself to this, Marlyss probed further, and the story emerged in dribs and drabs. That night so long ago, when Velva had gone out on Overnight Take-out, she had run into disgraced Mayor Farley V. Luce, smashed in his Mustang and his tongue running over with blarney.

"He said he'd make me a high-class call girl in Vegas," said Velva, wide-eyed on Marlyss's cot. "But Jeez, it was

coals to Newcastle, know what I mean, Madame Marlyss?"

"Please dear, don't call me that in the convent."

"Then the mayor got mad at me because I wouldn't do sixty-nine and the knotted rope and round the world, and he said, what kind of hooker are you anyway, you can't do them things. So I said, a decent one. Then I went off to Hollywood to be in porno movies, and I was, too, except I kept getting the giggles when they came out huffing and puffing, know what I mean? Then I got this contract at Walt Disney Studios to go into animation; I mean, I always had this undeveloped creativity for art . . ."

The gleaming rabbit mouth chomped on in the gloom, revealing new depths of squalor, error, and clueless good cheer. Although the girl had, in a way, changed the course of Marlyss's life, she couldn't find it in her heart to be pissed off. From afar she noticed the nuns returning from their wienie roast in awkward new jeans and embarrassed halters. Some of them waved at her window, anxious to retell the day's intrigue, as if she were a sort of eternal pajama party. Even from this distance, she could spot the laser eyes of Mother Januarius (was it Richard Nixon? Rasputin? Who?) sear through the spackle, ready for tonight's confrontation over the sewing room. I don't need this, thought Marlyss. I am too old, and besides, the Change. Any day now, surely. But how had it all happened, where had she gone wrong? What was it she needed to do?

"Then this Gypsy fortuneteller in Van Nuys says, she says, 'Sweetheart, you dream of perfection, that's your problem. You want the whole cookie.' Know what I mean, Madame Marlyss? 'You want,' she says, 'to know what it's all about.' "

"Yes," said Marlyss grimly. "I am acquainted with that feeling."

"So then I thought, I was raised a Catholic, Madame Marlyss."

"Lay Sister."

"You ever wonder why so many hookers was raised Catholic?"

"It's a mystery."

"Anyways, I mean I was real devout, communion veil and no fish on Friday and all, and then I met this guy . . ."

As Velva Rose confessed these and all the sins of her past life, especially those against Impure Thoughts and Deeds, Marlyss shot a glance at the crucifix. Why did you do this to me? she asked it. Never in her life had she burned with religious fervor, and her life had been plagued with mackerel-snappers and mystics and penitent whores; God's little joke, maybe. With her luck, she would end up the first woman Pope.

"Well, I mean, I come back up to Hebb, but you know how the town's changed. Nobody at the Place. Amateurs on the street corners, and I says to myself, I says, Velva Rose Compass, it's time you got reborn."

"And you want to be a nun."

"Sure thing, Madame Marlyss."

"Stop calling me that. The way of the Lord is not as easy as you think," Marlyss commented with some bitterness. "In fact, you might say it was downright ornery."

"Hey, hon." Velva Rose gave her best overbite smile and patted Marlyss on the knee. "I'm not afraid of the work and all. I mean, you know how I always jump right into a thing, Madame Marlyss."

"Lay Sister. Yes, I know."

"Just talking to you makes me feel like I want to go

for His service," Velva Rose burbled. "I mean, you make it all so clear. I want to join up this minute."

Why me, oh Lord? she accused the crucifix, but she told Velva Rose they would have to speak to Mother Januarius first, a real nun. It would be, she thought maliciously, a test of Mother Jan's Christian faith to accept into the fold another ex-prostie, and certainly Velva Rose's vote might be able to swing her plans for the sewing room. She went to the cot and gave the resurrected Takeout a Christian hug.

"Oh, Madame Marlyss, it's just a miracle seeing you here at the convent, after the whorehouse and all."

"Oh, I don't know," the Lay Sister said. "I guess I've always had a gift for running women's groups." It was an unkind fate God had chosen for her, and yet, wasn't there one more loose end she needed to tie up before she withdrew from the world of men and into her cell forever? The game wasn't over until you played your final card.

4

By midsummer, Mayor Triumph and the town council struck a bargain. They agreed to pay his salary if he came to work once in a while, and Sheep needed the money, although he figured they had got the best of the deal. Hebb Government Center was old and hot, designed by the Huedlerites, a sect expelled from Germany

by the Kaiser for their ungenerous views on reproduction, which they feared as devil's work. With memories of castles on the Rhine, they had erected a hive of stucco with turrets, chambers, passages, sudden mezzanines, and a dungeon for a jail. The mayor's office, a small torture chamber with a slit window at the top of the tower, had become, over years of indifferent leadership, a catchall for back issues of magazines, abandoned sofas, diplomas and awards, antler hatstands, an accordion roll-top desk with pigeonholes, a monster safe with a technicolor allegory of Commerce handing the palm to Railroading and Agriculture. On the wall were hundreds of dusty collodion prints: mad prospectors; ranchers with necks crisscrossed in the plaid of labor; sepia cavalrymen with sad eyes and droopy chin hair; the last of the Huedlerites refusing the flesh, their eyes transparent under flat hats as they fixed on a less horny world to come.

Most days, Sheep sat at the pigeonhole desk in his shirt sleeves, drinking spiked Fanta. Occasionally a secretary appeared from the lower depths with a paper to sign, but most had the good sense to leave him be. With pad and Texas Instrument, he calculated over and over the money he might have made if he had held on to the fossil beds. The money he might have made if he had kept the mineral rights or had been aware of their value. The money he might have made, the life he might have led. The money he might have made. How had FARCO dared to make him such a low offer? How had they known he would take it?

One day after the Fourth, a scorcher with the slit window open to the roasted air, he woke from a dream of profit margins to see a woman in a black dress, the kind nurses wore in World War I, stepping over a bale of

Saturday Evening Posts. She was still very beautiful. The Finnish hair was drawn up in a bun now, streaked with white and silver; the face was rounder, softer, but with cheekbones visible.

"I guess I'm lost," said a voice, a Golden Oldie. "They told me this was the Assay Office. Why, Sheep, is that you?"

"Well, Marlyss. Hey."

"How about that?"

"I never."

He grabbed a document to show he had some purpose in life, and found in his hand a pale yellow *National Geographic* of 1939 offering "Peaceful Poland, Land of Many Contrasts." Dropping this like a hot potato, he swung his feet off the pigeonhole desk and stood tall, commanding his stomach muscles to give some support for a change. Her scent reached him, breezes from the fjords mixed with holy water, and he wished he had rolled on extra-dry.

"Small world," he said.

"Talk about your coincidences."

"You're looking good."

"Still the same. I'd know you anywhere."

"Hey."

This seemed to exhaust the conversation. After a dead silence, he saw his duty and cleared old records and lampshades off the horsehair sofa in a Hiroshima of dust. Marlyss did not sit down, but she did not leave either.

"I want somebody in Assay to look at my property," she told him. "I've got an offer to tear it down and redevelop."

"Which property's that?"

"The Triumph Place, silly. FARCO wants to buy."

For a split second Sheep thought she meant the dive Winn and Mary Twotrees were running at home, but then remembered the whorehouse, a noble, dignified institution by comparison. He felt her green eyes upon him, amused. Or something.

"Don't look so sad, Sheep; I thought you'd be glad to see the Triumph Place go down."

"It don't break my heart. Naturally the place is historic. Ought to be a monument."

"God there's no pleasing the man," she said lightly, and then told him of her plan to finance a sewing wing at the Mission, where wayward Indian girls could learn a craft.

"So, you've reformed, have you?" he said, not meaning much by it, but realizing by the sudden thrust of her bosom, still U.S. Number One Prime, that she took it amiss.

"A woman has a right to go in business on her own."

"Especially the world's oldest profession."

"I would have thought the time for hard words was over."

"Oh, I got no beef with you anymore, Marlyss," he said magnanimously, the beefs and hard words thumping to get out of his throat. "Sure you won't have a seat? How's about a warm Fanta?"

"Thanks just the same."

There was a pinch at her mouth, and memory flooded back. After twenty-odd years, she was still a bitch, but then it struck him that he wasn't any knight in shining armor either. Why had he made that crack about the world's oldest profession, anyway? Through the slit window, the sounds of Hebb's new dawn, the buzzing of innumerable jackhammers, chainsaws, and Hondas, sanded the desert air. Everything had changed but them.

"That's a real pretty getup," he said, trying. "Is it your habit?"

"No. I'm only Lay."

"You always looked good in black."

"Thank you."

"Are you fixing to take your vows or what?"

"I honestly don't know. In a way, I wish I'd never given up the business."

"Was it my campaign for mayor that did it?"

"That and your little friend."

"Who's this?"

"I never had any idea you were so upset about the Place, and my safety." Her voice was gentler. "It was nice of you to send her."

"What little friend?"

"And then I felt so guilty about Velva Rose Compass."

"Oh, her," Sheep mumbled. He had forgotten the Overnight Takeout murder, still unsolved. Then Marlyss asked for directions to the Assay Office. He went to the safe and started drawing a map in the dust with his finger. She stood very near. They touched arms, and then pretended they hadn't. He messed up the first map and started another one, thinking of cool glaciers, the starburst of moles over her left shoulder, and the narrow slant of her pelvis. She was a Catholic now.

"Why didn't you come after me?" she asked quietly.

"I was waiting for you to come back."

"But I thought you . . ." . .

"No, you . . ."

The dress was very simple, with plain black buttons down the front. After kisses, the stainless steel cross pushed aside, he found a chaste cotton brassiere underneath, the kind that only the Catholic Church still had

access to in underground vaults at the Vatican. He imagined her panties as combed white cotton with the elastic right under the navel, and as it turned out, he was right.

"Sheep, I don't really know if we should. I'm practically a bride of Christ."

"Only Lay. Besides, I was raised a Catholic."

"I'll have to confess this. It stands to reason, with you a married man still and me divorced. There's bound to be a mortal sin in there somewhere."

"Just venial maybe."

"I guess we're still married in a way. Isn't it true that Catholics can't get divorced?"

"You've got the theology down pat."

"I went to college, remember?"

The office seemed a lot cooler with his clothes off, and the horsehair sofa, though scratchy and stiff, stretched long enough for an entire Victorian family.

"Do you think it will hold?" she asked, as its ancient joints complained.

"The old stuff's built to last."

"I've always said so."

Afterward, Sheep reflected that the only pleasant surprise offered by middle age was that sex didn't need to be grabby and showoff. There was time to go easy, to explore the byways. There was charity. It was probably good for minor arthritic aches and pains, too.

"Better late than never," he said.

"I guess."

"I could divorce Winn. She'd never notice the difference."

"Divorce is a sin."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Marlyss. Those nuns been brainwashing you?"

"Just testing. If I stay here fifteen more minutes, we'd be at each other's throats."

They both sighed and shared the Fanta as the mission underwear fluttered gently at half-mast on the antler hatstand.

"People change, Marlyss."

"I honestly don't think they do. I've seen a lot of them. Oh, maybe the outside edges wear off. But deep inside the little crotchets get more firm and set in their ways."

"At our age . . ."

"That's what I mean. At our age."

She rose from the creaking sofa. The stainless cross went back on, and then, sadly, the convent panties, closing off the Pearly Gates.

"Back to the Mission is it?"

"I think so. That was nice, Sheep, but there's something in me that won't settle for it. It had to be done." She smiled suddenly. "But now I feel the need to go back to that convent and buck for Mother Superior."

"Did you really want the Assay Office?" he asked tragically as the bra went on. "Or did you just come to taunt me?"

"I mean to sell the Triumph Place, all right, but . . . do you know it took me years to figure out what went wrong on our honeymoon, I was that dumb? You didn't help much by not explaining. And that false pregnancy, I was never so humiliated! Not to mention your mama . . ."

"Hey! You'll bust that rosary."

"Oh Sheep, you see how it is with us? There's love, and then there's torture. Life's just too short for both of those, and guess which one we picked?"

For a long time after she had left, he sat ass-naked on the horsehair sofa as the eyes of pioneers and fore-

bears looked calmly down. The terrible despair that had overwhelmed him the other two times Marlyss had deserted was not possible to him now, and he felt only an agreeable melancholy befitting the sunset years. In a way, he had at last achieved a goal set so long before. The marriage, finally, was consummated. It was true what folks said: life moved at a slower pace in the West, but it got there eventually.

*

His sad mood persisted throughout the rest of that golden, noisy summer, and wasn't much helped when he went to see the wrecking ball swing its first body blow to the Triumph Place. The whorehouse was a shell only; the gas crowd had long since raided the interior for antique fixtures that would give their mobile homes a memento mori of the Western heritage. A strange groan went through the place as the crane whirled: the cuckoo clock gingerbread crumbled, the shaken eaves snowed down historic leaf mold and mouse droppings, the French windows sprained. Before the second blow, Sheep and a few other old-timers turned away, a tear at the eye, a nostalgic hand to the crotch.

In the quiet of an early September morning, he walked back down Main Street, half unrecognizable in its false fronts of shiny tile and cinderblock. The old bars were disco palaces now; Wilma's Modes sold cassettes and tapes; the Sagebrush Tractor and Appliance lot sparkled with motorbikes and snowmobiles; Bernie's Beer and Bide-a-Wee was a parts place, with the new pioneers so big on technology. The painted bison on the sign of the Thunderhead Lounge was gone, replaced by what looked to be a giant Kotex in polyurethane, with the word *Zergo* on

it. Sheep had no idea what went on inside; in fact, more and more, his hometown seemed to him a distant planet.

However, the Last Stand still stuck out like a sore thumb on Main, a beacon of seediness and bygones. Climbing wearily to the porch, Sheep set aside the crinkled copy of *The Fountainhead*, sat on the empty bench, and stretched his legs in the mild copper sunshine. The other old coots wouldn't be up for hours. It seemed as if they slept in later and later, as if Earl Normandy's stroke had put the fear of God into them all. Even the dog wasn't around for indecent exposure, having gone to his Maker over the Labor Day weekend. For all three days, Boy had laid belly-up on the porch before anybody had noticed the difference.

Sheep sighed. He would have to stir himself if he meant to have some kind of life. Actually, though, his needs were being met. There was still the mayor's salary and leftover FARCO money, and the Last Stand hadn't raised its weekly rates since the days of the silver dollar. Winn and her girlfriend were buying the Triumph Place from him, no down payment, but a steady monthly check, with interest. And there was always Mama's diamond, hard-edged and glowing in the heart of his vault, a heritage of the past now worth a fortune with inflation and reawakened interest in tangibles. He had no wives to support, no swans or Indian servants, no imported chaise longues. Crazy how life worked out. Only last year, he had come home from an afternoon of humping Mount Rushmore, now the owner of his patio. He had helped his wife prepare a barbecue. Niles and Flo Hardesty had moved into town from the ranch: he had seen Flo walking the streets the other day, so slimmed down he scarcely recognized her. The whorehouse had been Hebb's chief

industry then, with no gas, no mobile homes. He had wanted to run for mayor to make a name for himself. Where had it all gone wrong?

Trying to puzzle out the course of events, Sheep spat absently at the Folger's can, and the gob hit the geranium plant dead center. Surprised, he tried again, and again, bull's eye! All his known waking life, Chunk Bovee had been trying to hit that plant, and the misses were to be traced in the blistered paint on the porch rail, the sour mold on the potting soil. Sheep tried his aim from various vantage points around the porch and saw where Chunk was making his mistake, spitting into the headwind from Main, instead of sneaking up on the plant sideways. Of course there was skill in it too. You had to keep your lips pursed in focus, and never let your aim wobble for a second.

Tired and dry after five straight slapshots, he sank into the porch swing and closed his eyes. No sense going to that hot office today with such a thing to show off. Any minute now, the others would be down, scratching and yawning, and in a casual kind of offhand way he'd invite all bets, maybe a round of beers to start, that he couldn't hit the geranium from the swing. First time off, he might just miss, to whet their interest. How they'd stare when he hit the nail right on the head! Or he might challenge Chunk to a duel, mouths at ten paces. Folks might come for miles around if they got really good at it: he'd make a name for himself yet.

The racket of morning rush hour was heating up beyond the porch as the gas crowd roared on out to the fields and the support industries hurried to open up on time. Sheep noticed none of it. He needed his rest to

insure good aim and to give his salivary glands time to recharge. His mind flashed bright geraniums and the awed faces of friends, and he scarcely heard a child cry, "Hey, Mommy, look at that funny old cowboy," as his head relaxed forward, snoozing, the mouth working up a supply of ammunition, happy.

5

On the afternoon of that same glorious Indian summer day, Loreen Bright Weasel came to the back stoop of her shack in the hills with a can of Olympia beer and a great moral dilemma eating at her innards. Needing her rest after so many good works in Hebb, she now felt the urge to gird up her loins again as a warrior of Jesus, especially after sitting around on her big fat wazoo all the summer long. And yet, wasn't part of the saintly life long days of doing nothing but praying? It was so hard to figure out the true way. What was Christianity all about, if not to figure out those unwelcome choices that He, in His infinite wisdom, kept thrusting down on mankind?

Deep in thought, she watched Pa playing with Valentine out by the wringer washing machine, shaping her baby a blackbird from weeds and mud and giving it words in his own special tongue. Valentine gurgled back in *his* own special tongue, and Loreen wondered if it wasn't a day too soon to get the boy started on a Catholic educa-

tion, so's he'd get in early on the Agony of the Cross. Then Loreen remembered that she herself had come late to the Faith, and it hadn't held her back one whit. God would let her know when the time came. His grace always rained down, whether a person was ready or not.

The proof of this was Brown.

He had been waiting the day she returned from the hospital, his camper van outside, painted with racing flames and a cobra. He had said she owed him his keep after putting him away, and right then, she had taken the name of the Lord thy God in vain. But Valentine liked Brown as he liked everybody, and Pa pointed out that it might not be a bad idea to have a man around, since not everybody on the Reserve was going to believe her story of a virgin birth. She had suffered a Dark Night about Brown, remembering lepers that saints carried across the waters and heavy children who turned out to be Christ. She didn't figure Brown as Christ, somehow, not the way he sniggered and winked when he cracked a dirty joke, but then he came into the kitchen where she prayed, and he was wearing only these thin bikini shorts with purple net at the side. At Reform School they had taught him to lift weights, so his rear and shoulders were solid muscle, unlike some, and he gave her a hug and said the inside of his camper was a lot bigger than the backseat of the old Parisienne, and softer, too. Then Loreen reminded herself that Jesus on the cross had forgiven them that knew not what they done, and wasn't it spiritual pride to put herself above the Passion?

Over the months she had talked to Brown about the Sacrament of Matrimony, too, but so far he wasn't all that hot and bothered about religion. Any day, though. She

had a reputation for sticking to a thing once she'd got started. Her first weeks back on the Reservation, she had visited all the Indians around with her Corporate Works of Mercy, not wanting only whites to have all the blessing. Soon, a steady stream of folks came seeking her out with gifts and even cash money, begging her to rest at home more often, so she wouldn't run down the spiritual batteries within.

Loreen sipped her beer slowly. Her good works had multiplied a thousandfold, like loaves and fishes, once she'd gone out and spread them around. Her name was a byword in every house and trailer across the Reservation. And yet, after Rainy Bird's fire, and Marvin Highway's tragic accident, and all the divorces down at the Running Deers', she couldn't help but feel her weary heart a-thirst for peace. The Lord might love the busy-bee in His service, but He rejoiced the more to see one single servant groaning from a tortured mind.

The trouble was, her back stoop wasn't all that hot a place for Christian meditation, what with all the whooping and hollering. Brown planned to go into the rodeo business and was out in the field now, riding old Turkeytrot, a gift from the Red Owl clan on the understanding she never trouble herself again in keeping their hated father alive with her Beatitudes. It was wonderful to be so loved that folks didn't want you to move a muscle, and yet how could she further her work in Christ with such a racket? Pa and Valentine were giggling now, as Turkeytrot, a swaybacked old sorrel, refused to budge away from his trough, no matter how Brown kicked and violated the Second Commandment.

Loreen smothered a grin; though the Catholics had

never exactly come out against a joke, the intent was plain. She opened the purple Benziger Brothers on her lap and tried to think of His just punishment, but her attention wandered to her happy family and the sorrel switching flies. She knew the Locomotive of the Sacraments backward, not to mention PALEGAS and the Catechism milk bottle of the sins. Did Jesus really intend a person to go over and over the same old stuff once its depths got plumbed?

She got up to fetch another beer from the zinc tub inside, her shower-thongs slapping against the linoleum. She kept her moccasins in the drawer now, after folks accused her of showing off in a vanity of adornment. The last time she had worn the Western Look was to visit the Mission, to consult with Father Grady, and find out the saintly way to give Corporate Works to Buddy Hanging Moon, who kept chasing her with an axe. To this day, she couldn't understand how the visit had led to her great spiritual leader and teacher getting defrocked.

Before all the fuss, Father Grady had warned her about the two types of saintly life. There was the Active, he said, which was doing it. Then there was the Contemplative, which was mainly sitting around. At that moment, Loreen had seen the light. It was clear she had been marked out by God, as in a brand of Cain, to run around with the Active. Hadn't she saved Hebb single-handed? Wasn't the Reservation a different place through her deeds? So grateful had she been for this thunderbolt, she had gone straight to Mother Januarius and praised Father Grady to the skies for his knack of teaching young girls through practices and the way he soothed them with his fine white hands stroking and feeling. This had been an Active Cor-

porate Work of Mercy and she was still proud of it, although Father Grady himself had urged the Contemplative upon her again and again.

Yes, she saw it all now. So wrapped up in the Active had she been, that the Contemplative had gone by the boards, and if she ever meant the Pope to take any notice, she'd have to hunker in on the life of the mind. Bringing a fresh beer back to the rocker — a gift from the needy, made out of deer antlers and a penance to sit on of itself — she turned her mind to inward prayer. It wasn't easy. Brown was yelling at her to give old Turkeytrot a slap on his lazy rump; Valentine called in excitement "Mama, Mama"; and Pa ran over to gabble out his funny sounds. The Asylum and the shock had brought him back to English for a time, but now the animals were taking over again, and it was just as well, with his human voice so hard to understand. Her soul yearned to join the world again, but then she realized it was God's temptations, trying to lure her away from the Contemplative. Firmly she clamped shut her eyes.

After a time, she had to admit the Contemplative had its points. The sun warmed her anklets, and the sweet, smoky breeze, first sign of a merciful winter, whispered prayers at her ears so she didn't have to strain much. Pa came and settled a sleeping Valentine in her arms, and she rocked slowly to keep the child at peace. An idle head was the devil's workshop, and yet God would stand by her in this time of trial. Wasn't there proof throughout southeastern Montana that He was always on her side?

Surrendering to His ineffable will, she let the beer can clunk to the floorboard. Valentine cooed in his sleep. The Contemplative was nice, and she allowed her soul its

peace, knowing full well that however quiet God meant her to be just now, He was holding her in readiness for another onslaught, when her eager heart, ready and waiting, would get its go-ahead, and she could burst forward once again like a blasting bomb of glory on the sinful, pining, all-unready world.

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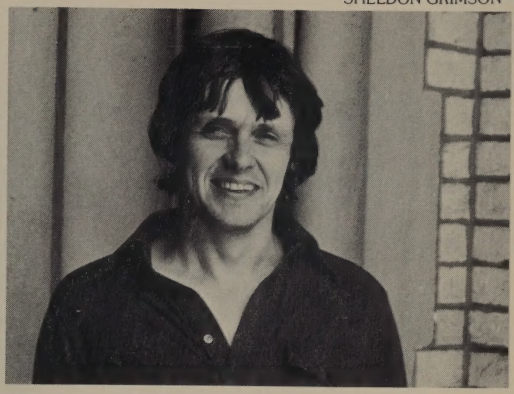

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Left alone, Loreen fed the Garb-all with poached eggs and oatmeal. Her plan was not working . . . Clearly God was punishing her for her spiritual pride . . . She realized that the good miracles were left for senior-type saints . . . but what could she do to start out? She had cleaned the house a million times already.

Looking around the spotless kitchen, her eye caught the blender, the toaster, and the electric wok. For some reason, Mrs. Triumph never put them in the dishwasher with the other things. Probably they needed hand washing . . . Quickly she filled the sink with lukewarm water and threw all of the dainty appliances in, scrubbing their movable parts and coils . . . Then she dried them for a few minutes in the oven, and plugged in the blender as a test case . . . Just her luck, the generator went on the blink by coincidence. Oh, if God would take His eyes off the sparrows as they keeled over and died, and let her heal the Triumphs' electricity! That would be a Beatitude to write home about.

—From THE PASSION OF LOREEN BRIGHT WEASEL

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